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If You Fear Someone May Take His or Her Life

As a parent, the worst thing you could ever have to do is bury your child. At 29 years old, my son took his own life after suffering from depression. Whether it's a family member, friend, neighbor or co-worker, we need to help those who need our help. I know now my son needed help, but what should others know to prevent this tragedy from happening to them?

Please know that while this is likely the most difficult thing you will ever face, you are not alone. In our community, the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition has a Web page with additional information about support for survivors of suicide, including a Survivors of Suicide Handbook. To find the handbook and other resources, visit www.sedgwickcounty.org (select "Suicide Prevention Coalition" from the Quick Click and Go drop-down box in the upper-right-hand corner of the page).

For others who are concerned about a colleague, neighbor, or loved one, it is important to know that most individuals give some warning of their intentions. The most effective way to prevent a loved one, friend, neighbor or co-worker from taking his or her life is to educate yourself so you can recognize the factors that put people at risk for suicide, take the warning signs seriously, and know how to respond.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates that suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. In 2010, there were 68 suicides in Sedgwick County. Overall, a history of mental illness was noted in approximately 78 percent of those suicides (primarily mood disorders, including depression and bipolar disorder, and substance related disorders). Approximately 50 percent had a history of prior attempts and/or a reported history of suicidal thoughts. Other related factors include relationship problems, loss of employment, housing insecurity, financial difficulties, legal trouble, and/or a history of medical illness. Use of a firearm was consistent as the most common method of suicide in Sedgwick County, followed by hanging and drug overdose. Toxicology reports were available for 67 of the 68 suicides in Sedgwick County during 2010. Of those evaluated, 78 percent tested positive for alcohol and/or other drugs.

Nationally, more than 90 percent of people who take their own lives are suffering from one or more treatable psychiatric disorders, including major depression (especially when combined with alcohol and/or drug abuse), bipolar disorder, alcohol and drug abuse and dependence, schizophrenia, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders and personality disorders.

Depression and the other mental disorders that may lead to suicide are in most cases both recognizable and treatable. Symptoms of someone at risk may include changes in sleeping patterns, a change in appetite or weight, intense anxiety, agitation, restlessness, fatigue or loss of energy, feelings of hopelessness, feelings of worthlessness, excessive guilt, feeling there's no reason or purpose to live or experiencing recurrent thoughts of death or suicide. Certain behaviors can also serve as warning signs, particularly when they are not characteristic of the person's normal behavior. In the presence of depression and other risk factors, easy access to guns and other weapons, medications or other methods of self-harm increases suicide risk.

Between 25 and 50 percent of people who take their own lives have previously attempted suicide. Those who made prior suicide attempts are at higher risk for actually taking their own lives.

If you fear someone may take his or her life:

Be Willing to Listen. Start by telling the person you are concerned. Be direct. Don't be afraid to ask if they are considering suicide, or have a plan or method in mind. You may feel anger toward the idea or person, but do not attempt to argue someone out of suicide. Rather, let the person know you care, that they are not alone, that suicidal feelings are often temporary and that depression or any other mental illness can be treated.

Get Help Now. If a friend or loved one is threatening, talking about or making plans for suicide, do not leave the person alone. Do not be sworn to secrecy. Get help to have firearms, drugs or sharp objects that could be used for suicide removed from the home. Take the person to an emergency room, call the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Hotline 24 hours a day at 316-660-7500, or call 9-1-1.