

To the Editor:

No one wants to die. Yet every year, people we know lose someone they love to suicide. The anguish is devastating for everyone. We are heartbroken for the individual who felt such despair that ending his or her life appeared to be the only answer. And we are heartbroken for the loved ones who are left to cope with such a terrible loss.

Exactly why people take their lives remains elusive. Depression can play a role, yet the vast majority of people with depression do not commit suicide. Researchers cite the rise in opioid addiction rates, economic inequality, trauma, and a sense of hopelessness among the reasons why some turn to suicide. Many experts agree that suicide is often the result of an untreated mental illness. Still, it's important to remember that millions of people experience all of the above and do not end their lives.

So, how can we as individuals and as a community help? The first step is preventing suicide by knowing the warning signs and taking them seriously. Like a stroke or heart attack, many potential victims exhibit behaviors indicating that suicide may be on their minds. The signs include increased alcohol and drug use, escalated aggressive, impulsive or reckless behavior, withdrawal from family and friends, or talking about death.

The danger of suicide increases dramatically when a friend or loved one is observed "putting their affairs in order;" whose mood shifts from despair to calm, or who is actively looking for a means to end their life, such as a firearm or prescription meds. They need immediate intervention and care.

It's never easy to ask someone if they are thinking about suicide. Our experience at the Brien Center affirms that most suicidal people are deeply conflicted about taking their own lives. We know that talking can often steer them toward the help and counseling needed to get their lives back on track.

As a community, we can help reverse the alarming trend in suicide by examining our misconceptions about addiction and mental illness. The shame and stigma experienced by those with behavioral health disorders adds to their already intense despair. We must replace shame and stigma with understanding and compassion.

Each year, the Brien Center participates in the "Out of the Darkness Community Walk," sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, to help raise awareness for suicide prevention. We will be walking again on Oct 5. Please visit the website at afsp.org for more information and make a donation to the Brien Team.

M. Christine Macbeth, ACSW, LICSW, President and CEO of the Brien Center for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.