

Press Release: Suicide Awareness Month - Part Four

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The Opposite of Suicide is Connection

- By Lila Bennett, formerly of Northeast Kingdom Human Services, a Designated Agency of the State of Vermont and part of the Vermont Care Partners

“It’s hard to find a piano sometimes . . .” It was the last post that my friend put on his Facebook page. The last effort of reaching out beyond the loneliness, shame, and despair that was silently consuming him until July 3, 2019 when it took his life. It’s not an uncommon story anymore. The silent sadness of our friends suffering alone, their only connection through the mirage of social media.

This friend of mine, was not a close friend anymore. He was a person five or six years younger than me who I used to babysit when I was an overly responsible and very anxious seventh grader. He was a boisterous little guy that loved brownies and hot fudge, and I loved how excited he would be when I would let him have seconds. He didn’t know I was also delighted because I was a kid loving the freedom of letting us BOTH have seconds. Time passed, and we grew up. I didn’t see him until my late thirties when he frequented my booth at the farmers’ market, and we would find ourselves in the midst of deeply emotional conversations. Our deep conversations at the market were not uncommon because, as a farmer raising animals for meat, it was easy to leap to conversations such as the fleeting beauty of life. I was newly divorced and raw. He was newly convicted of another DUI and raw. He was trying to survive, work, and play music with no driver’s license, and after a bit, no job. We would speak on those Saturday mornings of the harsh judgments of onlookers who don’t understand the full story. We would speak of our perceived remedies for shame- the importance of human connection, forgiveness, and hope. I remember the day he came to describe the crane that lifted his baby grand piano out of his apartment- the apartment he was getting evicted from because he was too loud with his late night piano playing and too late with his rent. My heart broke for him as he described watching his piano being lifted out and trucked to storage. Neither one of us knew that it would be the last place he ever saw it.

Those moments at the market were so full of angst but also always, of hope. We would embrace to say goodbye and through that connection try to help the other feel love and worth. We could both feel it for the other person, even if we couldn’t feel it on any given day, for ourselves. And that is what connection does. Connection is all about hope, and belief and comfort and understanding. Those things are so often forgotten in our daily struggles. We are often so consumed with holding ourselves to impossibly high standards: putting the perfect, filtered photo of our perfect filtered lives on Social Media, and in the process of trying to create connection, end up comparing ourselves to impossible ideals, becoming isolated and then lonely. I lost touch with my piano friend over the winter. I didn’t know I wouldn’t ever get to see him again. I will be ever more vigilant to extend my love and friendship to those I haven’t seen in person for a while. Social media, invented to create connection, can often create just the opposite. The more we can all remember this, and check in with our friends on more personal levels, the safer, happier, more connected and hopeful we will all remain.

What is it that makes people give up? With Suicide on the rise at a 33% increase since 1999, and 45,000 people dying by suicide in 2016, alone, it is a difficult question to answer. In general, overarching issues involving shame, hopelessness, and isolation seem to be prevalent. The research tells us is that one in five adults are having or have had suicidal thoughts, which means that if you look to your left or to your right in any moderately populated area, you are likely seeing at least one person who is suffering and in need of hope. Suicide is often said to be a permanent solution to a temporary problem. But the temporary problem brings suffering that is suffocating to the extent that it doesn't feel that there is any other way out. But there is always another way, and it is up to every single one of us who is alive today, to learn how to ask our friends how they are doing, to love them through their suffering, and to always provide hope. Asking a friend who is struggling, "Have you thought about killing yourself?" is an okay question to ask. It shows you care. It shows that they are not permanently flawed for having the thought. It shows that it's okay to talk about. Talking about things, the hardest of things, is what brings us closer, provides tethers of connection and understanding, literal lifelines of hope, empathy and understanding. We as a nation need to keep extending the lifelines and holding tight for all our friends.

At the end of the day, it is judgment that is the destructive force for most of us. Judgment leaves no room for understanding. When we feel judged, we immediately feel less worthy and misunderstood, and it sets our emotional footing on untrustworthy grounds.

"It's hard to find a piano sometimes . . ." Could mean just that. It could also mean, "I am alone, without the healthy outlet I have to process my darkness . . ." Let us all go about our lives remembering to love, to offer support without judgment, to be brave and ask our friends hard questions. We will then create longer and stronger lifelines, from one person's hope to another, to another, to another. The hard work that is happening at mental health agencies across the state is good, hard work, that deserves our funding and attention. The more education and outreach there is, the more support there will be to help all individuals see that every single person has beauty. We are all worthy, and it is up to each of us to remind each other to love and hope, every day.

For more information about suicide awareness and prevention, please visit the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center at www.vtspc.org or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org or by calling 1-800-273-8255. If you are a Veteran, call 1-800 - 273-8255 and Press 1. You can also use the Crisis Text Line by texting VT to 741741, and you will be connected with a live, trained counselor quickly. (learn more: www.crisistextline.org). Here in Chittenden County, call First Call at Howard Center 802-488-7777.

This series is a collaboration produced by members of the Vermont Care Partners statewide network of sixteen non-profit, community based agencies providing mental health, substance use and intellectual and developmental disability support. To find an agency near you visit: <https://vermontcarepartners.org/agencies/>