

For those who are suicidal, we can offer hope



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By **Guest Columnist** (<https://www.andalusiastarnews.com/author/Guest Columnist/>)

Email the author (<mailto:guestcolumnist@andalusiastarnews.com>)

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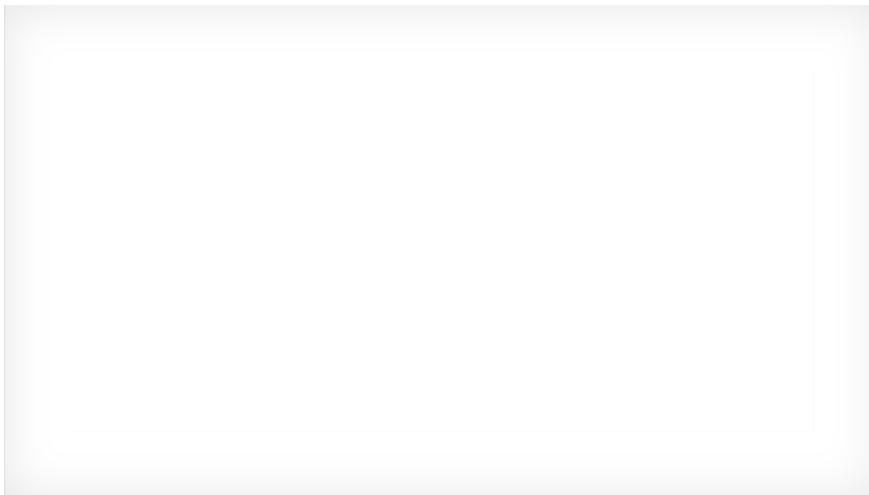
By the Rev. Cindy Howard

When I was a college student, my funny, fun-loving, talented, dearly loved uncle died by suicide. While he had not been quite himself for some time, no one expected that he would take his own life. It was a shock to those who loved him.

Suicides, those that take lives of the famous like Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain and those that take the lives of people who do not make headlines like my uncle, are more and more common in our society. A recent study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) revealed that suicide has been on the rise nationwide between 1999 and 2016. During that time, the number of suicides in Alabama rose by greater than 20 percent.

As people of faith, we ask ourselves how we can be of help and how we can love those who are at risk of suicide and those affected by the suicide of a loved one as we love ourselves. The place to begin is to learn about suicide. There is no single factor that leads to suicide. We often associate suicide with mental illness, but the CDC study reported that 54 percent of Americans who died by suicide had no known mental health history. Relationship issues and financial troubles tend to be top factors contributing to suicide across the country.

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While I am not a trained counselor or a mental health expert, it seems that reaching out, being present, listening, and acting without fear are foundations to helping those who are at risk of suicide. Simply being with someone and reminding them that they are loved and special to us can help them not feel alone. Listening without judgment, without giving easy answers, and without assuming we have all the answers can assure people that we “get it” and acknowledge their pain. We may be fearful of what we will hear if we ask someone if they are having suicidal thoughts or even if they have a plan to take their own life, but we have to put fear aside and ask those difficult

questions when necessary.

Most importantly, we can offer hope. Situations do change, and people do recover from depression. There can be a positive path forward.

One last note – I think it is important to reach out, be present, listen, and act without fear in dealing with those who have experienced the death of a loved one by suicide. Grief over the death of a loved one can be difficult in our culture, and grief following a suicide can be especially difficult. As Christians, the gift of time and space to grieve, to question, to express a range of emotions that may not be easy to articulate can be the greatest gift of love that we can give to those touched by suicide.

The Rev. Cindy Howard is the rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church.

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