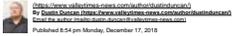


Recognizing signs: A close-up look at mental health in Alabama



LANEY — A report released in June of this year shows Alabama Department Public Health data from 2016 that reveals the suicide rate in Alabama hovers around 16.2 people out of every 100,000 in the state.

Although there are the numbers that are published for Alabama, Dr. Debra Neighbors, prevention services coordinator at Star Alabama Mental Health, said it covers a lot to dig to find.

"When we talk about suicide, it is really hard to pinpoint numbers, especially local data, because there are so many different types of cases that may happen," she said. "Sometimes it is only as good as the information given. It is not being identified as a suicide, then it won't be reported as a suicide."

In the past two months alone, there have been two 9-year-old girls who have committed suicide in Alabama, along with a few more students.

Madison Whitehead of Birmingham hanged herself Nov. 12 in her bedroom after being bullied at school. Police also cited suicide thoughts as a listed side effect of her ADHD medication.

McKenzie Adams of Demopolis also hanged herself at home Dec. 3. The family of the child said the incident happened in the wake of several instances of bullying, some of which were socially motivated, according to several media reports. The Demopolis City Board of Education reported recently there have been no findings of any reports of bullying by students, media reports say.

Neighbors said her office is seeing an increase in attempts, though it is hard to tell if the attempts are increasing because awareness is growing or if there are more people committing or attempting suicides.

"There are so many different avenues," Neighbors said. "I would say in the teenage and young adult population, we are definitely seeing an increase."

Contributing factors

Neighbors said there are several contributing factors to any suicide attempt, but especially in young children, who are facing more scrutiny than ever before.

"We are expecting 14-year-olds to operate as a 40-year-old," she said. "We are expecting them to know a lot more, and the truth of the matter is they are still 14."

She said the brain is still developing all the way up to the age of 25, but many people now expect young teenagers to engage with a maturity level well beyond their years.

Social media is another factor that brings a new set of risks that this generation is facing like never before. Neighbors acknowledges social media has several great tools, but there are children today who don't know what life is like without it.

"It used to be when kids got home from school it stopped," she said. "Now, kids can never get away from it."

Substance abuse can also be a huge factor for suicidal thoughts in young people.

Neighbors said that many times people abuse substances because they were certain pain to stop.

"Many times, they turn to drugs or alcohol because it is readily available and relatively cheap," she said. "In a lot of adolescents and young adults, it is masked as typical behavior."

She said there is an expectation by society that teenagers will drink alcohol and experiment with certain behaviors and it is written off as typical development. However, sometimes those teenagers are using those substances to mask pain.

"Our brain doesn't stop developing until you're 25 years old," she said. "Any time they are using something that alters the way they think, it is just to exacerbate any thoughts."

Neighbors said most of the people she has worked with that have attempted suicide were under the influence of some substance when they made the attempt.

When during

The holidays are typically a warm time for many people who spend time with their family, but Neighbors said there are a lot of people in the world who may not have a loving family or may not have any family. For this reason, she said there is an increase of suicidal thoughts during the holiday months.

"The reality is that for a lot of people, the holidays are not a warm time," she said. "It is important for us to recognize that."

She said it is important to not push individuals who don't want to be involved during the holidays. She said it is critical to let people get involved at their own pace and to recognize everybody's holiday experience isn't the same.

"There is a lot of data that shows seasonal depression is a real thing," Neighbors said. "In the winter, there is less sunlight, people are going to work in the dark and coming home in the dark. People are less likely to exercise and are typically eating heavier meals. So, our self-image and esteem can go down a bit."

How to help

The most important thing people can do to help somebody with suicidal thoughts is to talk about it, Neighbors said.

The Alabama Department of Public Health releases a list of things that confronting a person about suicide will only make them angry and increase the risk of an attempt. In reality, the department says asking about suicide lowers that person's anxiety, opens up communication and reduces the risk of impulsive acts.

Neighbors said most people with suicidal thoughts aren't going to come out and say they are having such thoughts, but if they are asked if they are thinking about suicide, research shows those people are willing to accept help.

She said those with suicidal thoughts also generally have low self-esteem, so they feel that the people around them don't love them or that they cannot ask for help or be honest.

"It is not easy to say, 'You'll be fine, but for somebody who is experiencing those thoughts, they may not be fine,'" she said.

Neighbors said using "I" language instead of "you" language can also be key.

"Saying phrases like 'you just need to brush it off,' that puts the blame back on the person who is feeling those thoughts and they are feeling bad enough," she said. "However, saying 'I am noticing this is what is going on and I want to help,' takes the blame off the situation."

She said being vulnerable and having empathy is crucial in those situations.

"We just want to fix things and move on and make everything OK," Neighbors said. "But in reality, it is that connection to humans that is what makes it better."

The National Suicide Prevention Hotline is a great tool for anybody with suicidal thoughts or for anyone who may want to help a person they suspect has suicidal thoughts. The number is 1-800-273-8255.

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