

Mental illness and suicides: The silence is killing us

Paul Reich, guest commentary | Posted: Thursday, January 12, 2017 5:48 pm

In 2015, almost 43,000 Americans, including 1,083 Coloradoans, died by suicide, placing Colorado seventh among states in the U.S. (per 100,000 in population). On average, one person dies by suicide every eight hours in Colorado and suicide is the leading cause of death for ages 10-14 and the second leading cause of death for ages 15-44. More than six times as many people die by suicide annually than from homicide in Colorado.

As a country, we are facing an epidemic of unprecedented proportions involving mental illness and suicide. Our mental health care system is fundamentally broken due, in part, to the lack of trained providers and insufficient resources dedicated to mental health, locally and nationally. The U.S. has a severe and growing shortage of trained therapists and doctors specializing in mental health and psychiatric disorders. Fifty-nine percent of psychiatrists practicing today are over the age of 55 and new medical school graduates are not attracted to the field in sufficient numbers to meet the growing demand.

Further, the stigma associated with mental illness continues to hamper our ability to openly discuss the topic and shapes the public dialogue, or lack thereof, and our nation's response to a public health crisis.

Death by suicide remains largely a hidden epidemic in our county as many individuals who suffer from mental illness or a substance use disorder are unable or unwilling to talk openly about their illness due to the stigma associated with mental illness. While the reasons individuals take their own lives are complex, there is a clear link between mental illness and suicide; in 2010, according to a Centers for Disease Control study, approximately 84 percent of individuals who complete suicide had symptoms of mental health problems.

Fortunately, some high-profile individuals are willing to speak out about mental illness. Bruce Springsteen wrote eloquently about his struggles with anxiety and depression, including a severe depression in his 60s. Carrie Fisher spoke publicly about her struggles with bipolar illness and addiction, and Robin Williams' widow opened the door to his struggles with depression following his suicide. These efforts help all of us to realize that mental illness is common, with almost 1 in 5 adults suffering a mental disorder or illness each year. Mental Health Colorado estimates that more than one million Coloradoans experience a mental health or substance use disorder each year.

Mental illness is treatable — 90 percent of those who receive treatment achieve recovery and can live, work, learn and participate in their communities. Regrettably, few individuals diagnosed with a mental illness receive treatment — some studies suggest as few as 2 in 5 individuals with mental health problems receive treatment, often years after they first experience the symptoms of a mental illness. Imagine a physical illness that impacted 20 percent of our population, but we treated less than half of those individuals. We would find it unacceptable if we only treated 40 percent of cancer patients, or those with diabetes, or those with broken legs on the ski mountain.

What can you do? If you have a story of your personal experience with mental illness, be willing to share

it to help reduce the stigma. Sign up for Mental Health First Aid training, “CPR for the Mind,” through Tri-County Health Network. Lobby your elected officials to support more funding for mental health and substance use treatment and prevention. Demand that the Affordable Care Act, which mandated mental health and substance abuse treatment as one of 10 “essential benefits,” continues to protect your right to receive treatment for mental health under your insurance. Support state legislation to eliminate the incarceration of the mentally ill, and encourage increased funding to provide more in-patient hospital beds for individuals suffering from mental illness in Colorado, as well as to provide more out-patient treatment options.

For more information about what you can do to advocate for improved mental health services, visit Mental Health Colorado’s website (www.MentalHealthColorado.org). If you or someone you know needs help, contact the Center for Mental Health, Telluride Medical Center or a private practice therapist to find appropriate professional help. If it is a crisis, contact the 24-hour Rocky Mountain Crisis Partners Help Line at 970-252-6220, or call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK to talk to a trained therapist.

It is time to break down the barriers and the stigma that prevent many in our communities from living productive and rewarding lives. We must ensure that adequate treatment is provided to all individuals who suffer in our communities, and encourage those suffering from a mental health challenge to seek treatment.

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