Grieving death by suicide

By Kathy Hubbard

Here are the statistics. We’ve lost three local children to suicide in the last year. In the U.S. it’s the second leading cause of death in 15 to 24-year olds and the third leading cause of death in 10 to 14-year olds. For every suicide there are at least 25 attempts.

Yesterday’s newspaper had an article about the school district’s crisis response plan and the superintendent’s goal of creating a task force focused on suicide and mental health prevention and education. I applaud Shawn Woodward’s leadership.

A booklet titled “SOS, A Handbook for Survivors of Suicide by Jeffrey Jackson published by the American Association of Suicidology (I had never heard of them either) states that death by suicide is different than death by any other circumstance.

“The person you have lost seems to have chosen death, and that simple fact makes a world of difference for those left to grieve. The suicide survivor faces all the same emotions as anyone who mourns a death, but they also face a somewhat unique set of painful feelings on top of their grief…”

He goes on to list four elements – guilt, stigma, anger and disconnection – that can be used as a basis of today’s discussion. Let’s start with guilt. We know we can’t control death by disease or accidents or certainly old age, so many of us will I internalize the suicide by asking, “What could I have done to prevent this?”

Jackson says, “Guilt is the one negative emotion that seems to be universal to all survivors of suicide, and overcoming it is perhaps our greatest obstacle on the path to healing.

“You are not responsible for your loved one’s suicide in any way, shape or form,” he wrote. “Write it down, say it to yourself over and over again (even when it feels false). Tattoo it onto your brain. Because it’s the truth.”

Often families want to brush the cause of death under the carpet because they feel there’s a stigma attached to suicide. Over 90 percent of suicides are caused by depression. It’s a shame that we, as a society, continue to believe that depression is a weakness not the medical mental disorder that it really is.

“While mourners usually receive sympathy and compassion, the suicide survivor may encounter blame, judgement, or exclusion,” Jackson said.

“Anger is a natural part of the grieving process,” Jackson wrote. “Anyone who mourns may feel anger – frustration at being powerless in the face of death or rage at some real or perceived culprit. However, those who mourn a suicide know the identity of the responsible party, and who wouldn’t feel anger toward the person who ended the life of someone we love and who devastated everyone around us?”
And as for disconnection, Jackson says that when a loved one dies by other causes we know that they would still be here if they could. “Because our loved one seems to have made a choice that is abhorrent to us, we feel disconnected and ‘divorced’ from their memory. We are in a state of conflict with them, and we are left to resolve that conflict alone.”

About healing, Jackson wrote this affirmation: “Someone I loved very much has ended their own life. I will never truly know all that was happening in their mind that brought them to that tragic choice.

“However, there are things of which I can be reasonably certain – if they were here, even they could not fully explain their mindset or answer all my questions. In their state of mind, they could not have fully comprehended the reality of their own death. They could not have fully appreciated the devastating impact their suicide would have on the people in their life.

“As such, by their last act, they made their most tragic mistake, unknowingly creating unparalleled pain in the hearts for those whom they most loved.”

And finally, Jackson said, and I wholeheartedly agree, don’t try to go through the grieving process alone. There are a lot of resources in this community. Please take advantage of them.

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