

Depression: Breaking the Silence

According to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), suicide is the 12th leading cause of death in the United States, and nearly 46,000 Americans died by suicide in 2020. And according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP), depression is the most common condition associated with suicide. Despite this, it is often undiagnosed or untreated.

Many people who have lost a loved one to suicide are left wondering how they did not know their loved one was struggling, but often people who are suffering from depression do so in silence.

“It’s elusive. It’s hard to know. And a lot of people with depression and anxiety are very secretive about it, because they don’t accept it themselves. So they try to hide it from family members and they don’t want to be open about it. So it is our duty to make them understand that it’s okay,” says Marybeth Evans, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker.

Just this year alone, the world has lost many famous faces to suicide: former Miss USA Cheslie Kryst; NCAA athletes Sarah Shulze, Katie Meyer, Jayden Hill, Robert Martin, and Lauren Bennett; country music star Naomi Judd; former ‘Toddlers and Tiaras’ star Kailia Posey. These individuals were thriving in their careers and were known for their talents and successes. What most people did not know was that each of them was silently suffering. Masked depression is not new. In recent years, the deaths of actor and comedian Robin Williams and designer Kate Spade also shocked the world.

Although breaking the stigma surrounding mental illness has come a long way over the years, many people still have a hard time grasping why someone who is seemingly living a great life may suffer from depression. While trauma or other big events that may happen in one’s life can certainly be a contributing factor that increases the risk for depression and suicide, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) says that other factors like genetics, other medical conditions, or brain changes also can play a role.

Depression does not discriminate. In fact, sometimes the people who are seemingly successful and thriving may be the ones who are most afraid to let people in, as they do not want anyone’s perception of them to change. These people often put added pressure on themselves to mask their feelings.

“There’s a lot of performance anxiety. There is a lot of feeling like people expect you to be on all the time. It’s very hard to keep up with that kind of self-pressure. And at times, if you’re not getting help for that, it becomes overwhelming,” Evans explains.

So, how can we break this silence and bring mental illness and depression to the forefront?

Evans says that it is important not to assume that someone isn’t or could not be struggling even if they may not meet the [classic signs of depression](#). Whether they are a celebrity or a close loved one, you may never truly know how someone feels on the inside unless you ask. And if someone does disclose to you that they are feeling depressed or suicidal, it is important to listen – and to not disregard their feelings. Instead, if someone discloses their depression to you, take it seriously and help them get in touch with a mental health professional.

“I can’t tell you how many people I’ve had through my practice who said they used to tell people to just pull themselves up by their boot straps. People who say that have never had depression, or at least not major depression – let’s put it that way. They think of depression as one of their bad days. And they know and we all know that if we’re having a bad day, we could go in and take a shower and wake up and go into work and our day will turn out okay. But that’s not depression,” says Evans.

The more we break down the stigma surrounding mental illness, especially depression and suicide, the more people will feel comfortable being candid about their feelings and seeking help. The good news is that there are many treatment options available. The first step is accepting that you are struggling – the next is reaching out to someone you trust.

Whether you confide in a loved one, a mental health professional, an acquaintance, or someone else, help is available.

“They say the best treatment for most mental illness is a combination of therapy and medicine. I often will recommend somebody to be on medicine, too – and a lot of people are very averse to that. But if you are going to treat a headache, you take an aspirin. And if you are going to treat your mental health, that’s what antidepressants are for. It doesn’t mean you have to stay on them forever, but sometimes if you get on them, you might want to stay on them because you’ve never felt that good. You never had that lack of depression or lack of anxiety. And it’s just enough to keep you from feeling lousy all the time,” Evans advises.

Evans says that once diagnosed with depression, a treatment plan can be established. And while depression does not necessarily go away overnight, a mental health professional will guide you through your treatment journey. She adds, “You can’t give out anything unless you have something to give. And I think a lot of us – as parents, in our community, our faith, our families, at work – sometimes need to be filled.”

If you or a loved one is struggling with depression or suicidal thoughts, help is available – and you are not alone. Contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline for 24/7 free and confidential support.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

- CALL 1-800-273-8255
- TEXT “TALK” TO 741-741
- VISIT WWW.SUICIDEPREVENTIONLIFELINE.ORG