You Can Make a Difference
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by Bob Swanson

In today’s information age, it’s easy to get overwhelmed by the vast extent of national and global issues. We are bombarded with so much information that it can often be difficult to comprehend how we can impact any of these issues. As a result, we can have a tendency to retreat to a flight scenario and just focus on our own individual and personal issues.

Suicide deaths are one such example where it can be easy to get overwhelmed by all the information and think there’s nothing we can personally do about it. In 2017, U.S. suicide deaths exceeded 47,000, which is a 33 percent increase since 1999. While that number is astronomical, the good news is that each of us has the ability to impact this crisis and save a life.

With so many of us having been impacted by the suicide death of a family member, friend, neighbor or fellow employee, I would invite you to consider how you can have a positive impact. What are some of the simple steps you can take?

1. **End the silence.** Create an atmosphere where it is acceptable and safe to talk about mental illness as an illness of the brain. Silence creates a heavy burden for the person living with the illness and their family members.

2. **End the stigma and shame that surrounds mental illnesses and suicide.** Due to the shame, many individuals with mental illnesses either don’t receive the treatment they need, or their treatment is delayed.

3. **Refrain from references of blame.** It is not someone’s fault if they have a mental illness.

4. **Use appropriate terminology regarding mental illness and suicide.** The words we use have a powerful impact in shaping our attitude toward mental illness and suicide. Treat mental illness like the diseases they are and refer to them as such. Instead of saying, “he’s bipolar,” say “he lives with bipolar disorder.” Instead of saying “she committed suicide,” say she “died by suicide.”

5. **Show compassion and flexibility for someone living with a mental illness in the same manner as you would for someone living with a physical illness.** Remember that due to stigma and shame, an individual living with a mental illness will often disguise the pain that he or she is experiencing.

6. **Understand there is a continuum with all illnesses from being a minor ailment to being a serious affliction.** There is also a cycle to most illnesses – they are not static.

(CONTINUED ON PG. 2)
Now let’s think about some real life work situations and how we approach them. Often in the work environment when someone is away from work due to an illness or injury, a period of light duty or a flexible work schedule is implemented until the person returns to being 100 percent. In addition, fellow employees are usually supportive in assisting their fellow employee’s return to their normal work level.

Understand the unique difficulties with being out of work for a mental illness such as anxiety disorder versus being out of work for cancer treatment. Both cases will require compassion and flexibility. In neither situation is the person pleased with their illness and the impact that it is having on their work performance. In which instance will fellow employees and the company typically exhibit more support and compassion? Why are they not the same? Hopefully by adopting the action steps listed above, the level of support for both of these employees will be the same.

As Smokey Bear used to say, only you can prevent forest fires. Prevention of forest fires is the responsibility of each of us. The same applies to the prevention of suicide. Each of us has the ability and responsibility to prevent suicides. Take the time to save a life.

About the Author - Bob Swanson

Bob Swanson is the past president of Swanson & Youngdale and the first Chairman of FCA International. He tragically lost his son Michael to suicide on March 13, 2009 at the age of 33. Bob now focuses his efforts on creating awareness of the impact of mental health and suicide in the construction industry.

Find more of Bob’s blogs at:

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