



Looking at Suicide in Relation to the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Becky Stoll, LCSW

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ALTON - September is National Suicide Prevention Month, which serves as a time for mental health advocates, prevention organizations, survivors and community members to come together and raise awareness about suicide prevention.

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S., and the suicide rate has increased by 35% since 1999. Although we will not have the data for 2020 for some time, there is no doubt that the significant events that have taken place this year, most notably the COVID-19 pandemic, have had significant psychological and social effects.

What we know about COVID-19 and suicide

A CDC study conducted in June 2020 found that mental health challenges, substance use and suicidal ideation related to the pandemic have significantly increased, with 40% of adults reportedly struggling with one or more of these concerns. This increase is likely due to a combination of COVID-related stress and economic hardship.

The percentage of people who had seriously considered suicide in the 30 days prior to the study was more than double the amount of those who had seriously considered suicide in the 12 months prior to a 2018 study (10.7% versus 4.3%). These numbers were considerably higher for Black respondents (15.1%), Hispanic respondents (18.6%), essential workers (21.7%), respondents aged 18-24 (25.5%) and self-reported unpaid caregivers for adults (30.7%).

New opportunities in our COVID-19 world

Although these statistics seem grim, the pandemic has also brought increased access to mental health services. Many organizations have expanded telehealth services in response to COVID-19, allowing patients to receive care from wherever they are. Compared to March 2019, telehealth claims in March 2020 increased significantly in the Northeast (15,503%), the South (3,427%), the Midwest (2,842%) and the West (1,986%).

At Centerstone, we have provided more than 600,000 services via telehealth since March. We have also seen an increase in the number of appointments kept for those we have identified as high risk for suicide since transitioning to digital services. Historical and anecdotal evidence has shown that telehealth decreases barriers to receiving healthcare and related services and encourages people to schedule and maintain more appointments for their care.

People need people

If you know anyone who has experienced or is experiencing suicidal thoughts, one of the best things to do is to help them build a support system.

Finding a community of people who understand the signs and complexity of suicide can help struggling individuals feel supported. Although our present COVID-19 world can make it difficult to physically see people, online communities are still available.

In addition to community building, finding professional help is also essential. Mental health counselors have dedicated their lives to helping people identify struggles and providing solutions and prevention strategies. They can guide you or your loved one on a path to healing and wellness.

I look forward to others joining me this September as we foster more fruitful conversations about suicide prevention, sharing resources and stories and working to help reduce the stigma often associated with suicide and other mental health concerns.

Becky Stoll, LCSW, is vice president for crisis and disaster management for Centerstone, overseeing the organization's suicide prevention efforts, 24-hour Crisis Call Center, Mobile Crisis Response Teams and Crisis Management strategies.

NATIONAL SUICIDE PREVENTION MONTH FACTS

National Suicide Prevention Month is recognized in the United States each September. The goal of National Suicide Prevention Month is to unite mental health advocates, prevention organizations, survivors and community members to promote suicide prevention awareness.

Related awareness events within the month include National Suicide Prevention Week (Sep. 6-12) and World Suicide Prevention Day (Sep. 10). At Centerstone, we promote prevention efforts year-round, but September marks a time when we can give special attention to those affected by suicide.

Statistics on suicide:

10th
Leading cause
of death in the U.S.

2nd
leading cause of death
among people ages 10-24
in the U.S.



