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How to Fight Suicide

Keeping folks alive is a collective task.

Agnes McKeen, who lost her son to suicide, is working to help those who have suffered heal.

Credit Abbie McClung



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Agnes McKeen lives in Klamath Falls, Ore. About three years ago, at 16, Agnes's son Harrison took his own life.

“In losing Harrison I lost all direction for every ounce of love that a mother has for her child; I lost any idea of where to direct that love. Just because Harrison's gone doesn't mean my love for him went away,” she says.

“And I had to learn to love that which is not physically here. And now my son's energy is woven into the fabric of the universe, and that's where I directed my love. ... So now my love goes to the community.”

She expresses it by trying to help people prevent suicide and deal with the grief that comes in its wake.

(You can watch a short video about Agnes [here](#).)

You've probably seen the recent statistics about the suicide epidemic — that suicide rates over all have risen by over 30 percent this century; that teenage suicides are rising at roughly twice that rate; that every year 45,000 Americans kill themselves.

And yet we don't talk about it much. It's uncomfortable. Some people believe the falsehood that if we talk about suicide, it will plant the idea in the minds of vulnerable people. Many of us don't know what to say or do. A person may be at risk of committing suicide when he or she expresses hopelessness or self-loathing, when he or she starts joking about "after I'm gone," starts giving away prized possessions, seems preoccupied with death, suddenly withdraws or suddenly appears calm after a period of depression, as if some decision has been made.

When you're around somebody like that, don't try to argue with her or him. Don't say, "You have so much to live for!" Or, "Do you realize how much this will devastate the people around you?" If you gasp or act shocked, you'll burden the person with even more shame and guilt, pushing that person even harder to withdraw.

Sufferers will often lie about their plans. According to one study, 80 percent of suicide victims deny suicidal thoughts before killing themselves. The first thing to do, Agnes advises, is validate their feelings: "I can only imagine what you're feeling right now." Then ask directly: "Are you thinking about ending your life?" Remember, the person in front of you is only contemplating suicide because he thinks it is the only way to get out of the pain.

Your next job is to help them cope. People contemplating suicide are often in the grips of a temporary mood catastrophe, to which they unfortunately see a permanent solution.

The pain is real but not forever. Most people who attempt suicide and fail are later glad they failed. Get them to talk about the pain, so they can understand its contours. Ask them to journal their thoughts. Over time most of them will see that there is a compulsive voice in their head telling them that they are worthless and that there is no hope, and that this voice is a lying voice.

The voice may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain. Ask them to write down a life plan for those moments when the lying voice gets loudest: Who will they call? Where will they go? Hang the contact information right on the wall. Don't let such a person swear you to secrecy. You're going to find more help. Try anti-suicide apps, like Tec-Tec, available through [Apple](#) or [Amazon](#).

We also need to go broader. Suicide is a societal problem. It's strongly associated with social isolation. Men die at higher rates than women, single people more than married

people, rural people more than urban people, Native Americans and whites more than blacks or Latinos.

It's also a values problem. Our individualistic culture means there are vast empty gaps in our social fabric where people suffer alone and invisible. It's also a guns problem. A lot of people die simply because at their lowest moment, there happened to be a gun around.

Agnes wrote to me that if you meet someone who has lost someone to suicide, there are better ways to begin a conversation. "SAY THEIR LOVED ONE'S NAME!" Share a memory. When you ask how the survivor is doing, don't let her say, "It's not about me." Because it is, and about her recovery.

Agnes believes in professional help but says what's really necessary is belonging and peer counseling, "people pouring their heart out, and it creates the mentality that, 'if they can do it, I can do it.' ... Give folks a feeling of hope that we can rise out of this and we can do it together."

Her life has been messy, like a lot of lives, but Agnes has a hard-earned wisdom. "I woke back up after losing Harrison on Dec. 28, 2015. I was sitting on my front porch talking to Harrison like I still do. I said, 'Gosh darn it, Harrison, didn't you know how much I loved you!' I felt him move through me. I could feel the warmth, like you get when you wrap your hands around a cup of coffee. And I heard him say, 'Of course I know, Ma.' I felt him."

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David Brooks has been a columnist with The Times since 2003. He is the author of "The Road to Character" and the forthcoming book, "The Second Mountain."



By David Brooks

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