

**Suicide Summit
Sept. 24, 2007**

It is so gratifying to see such a wonderful turnout today. This is an acknowledgement of a problem in our community..one that, up until now, has been hidden in the shadows.

There is a lot to learn about suicide...a lot to understand.

It's a huge problem. The numbers are awful, and I can't help thinking that we would have task forces, blue-ribbon commissions, News at 10, and front-page headlines if we were battling a disease or tracking down a serial killer.

Yet, depression does spread like a disease .. aided and abetted by a curtain of silence that hangs between potential victims, their loved ones, and those who can help.

In a sense, depression is like a serial killer, preying on the vulnerable .. taking lives anonymously .. because it is cloaked in unwarranted shame and embarrassment.

This can't go on. We have got to drag this issue kicking and screaming out of the closet.

The numbers tell us that men represent 8 out of 10 suicides in Wisconsin.

Women represent 2 in 10 deaths. But women attempt suicide at nearly twice the rate.

My wife, Gay, succeeded on the first try. She had been depressed most of her life. Then, for whatever reason, it got worse. She was lost in an empty world. A world I can't imagine..and a world she couldn't escape.

Looking back, I remember a time when we were sitting in our family room, she, not saying or doing anything, just buried in her thoughts. I got up and brought my face close to hers and asked what she was thinking. She lifted her eyes to mine and said, "Nothing. There's nothing there. My mind won't work."

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A suicide touches many people. I lost my wife. My three daughters lost their mother. A mother lost her daughter, a sister lost a sister and on and on.

Why did my wife commit suicide? We don't know. When she was found by my youngest daughter with the van still running in the garage, there was a note with

instructions to do this and that .. formal instructions to put her affairs in order. She wrote the words goodbye to each of us. But no answers.. no explanation.

Why do people commit suicide? I believe that that's the only choice they see. Consider if you are trapped in a burning room located high atop a skyscraper. Flames approach where you're standing. The heat is alarming. You are literally being burned alive. You are desperate for an escape. There is none, except the window 60 stories up. There is no choice. She jumps.

I have to think that my wife's near lifelong depression became so painful, that it was like living in a burning room. In her mind, she took the only way out.

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I would like to talk about the "curtain of silence" that shrouds topics like depression and suicide, especially because it seems like anything goes today: sex, drugs and rock 'n roll, as they say. It's everywhere. Even "Dog" the Bounty Hunter gets his own TV program and we can't talk about a disease that takes more lives than cancer?

In a way we've seen this before. At one time it was and still is to a degree, taboo to talk about having cancer. The taboo for depression or suicide is worse. There's something in our culture that esteems concealing pain. We, "keep quiet" about it.

The person's spouse or children .. they think they're helping by honoring those "keep quiet" wishes. Or, they're embarrassed to bring attention to it.

Employers and co-workers, who sometimes know more than family members are reluctant to speak out. And for friends of someone depressed, well, maybe it's too awkward, or uncomfortable, or impolite to talk about.

With depression, the curtain of silence falls everywhere. In fact, depression turns the mind against itself. Sometimes no one knows of the suffering because the victims disguise their illness. In my wife's "outside world," there was no way anyone knew she was depressed and suicidal.

She worked at a grocery store .. in the office with lots of "people contact." She had a forthright and engaging personality with customers and co-workers.

But she'd come home a different person, with little to eat and little to say. She closed herself off.

I once asked if she had thoughts of suicide, and she scolded me for thinking such a thing. Another time I broached the subject and she said she'd never take her life. She promised. Unfortunately, I believed her.

As a survivor of suicide, I'm learning many things, every day, but everything I learn seems to come down to this: If you think talking about depression and suicide is awkward, embarrassing and difficult - think of the alternative. Please help bring depression and suicide out of the closet. Don't try just once. Try again and again and again. We owe it to our loved ones, our friends, our neighbors and co-workers.

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I'd like to thank Cheryl Wittke and Bonnie Schmitt of Safe Communities for inviting me to share this time with you.

Thanks to all of you for your interest. Thank you for your consideration, and most of all thank you for the good and essential work you do.