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Curbing a county crisis

You can help to lower our area's suicide rate

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Colleen Carpenter is a Fort Wayne-based trainer and consultant on suicide prevention. She facilitates the Stop Suicide Northeast Indiana coalition.

Warning signs • Talking or writing about suicide or death/dying • Sleeping or eating too much or too little • Giving away personal items or making final arrangements such as a will • Withdrawing from friends or social activities (including social media) or isolating themselves • Dramatic change in personality, appearance, work, school or hobbies • Showing extreme changes in mood or behavior • Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly • Increasing use of alcohol/drugs • Talking about being a burden to others • Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain • Expressing feelings of hopelessness and having no reason to live • Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge • Saying goodbye to friends and family as if for the last time • Looking for a way to commit suicide, such as searching online or buying a gun • Sudden cheerfulness after a period of depression To learn more, go to [//suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-someone-else/](https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-someone-else/) or Stop Suicide's website, www.stopsuicidenow.org.

This is my 15th year marking National Suicide Prevention Week. This year, it seems even more imperative to be talking about what we can do to prevent suicide.

June overwhelmed many of us as we grappled with how two seemingly successful and happy people (Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain) could end their lives. Ironically, the same day Bourdain died, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report noting a 30 percent increase in suicide since 1999 – a trend I often cite during training but which remained relatively unknown.

The following week, as we prepared to host the annual state suicide prevention conference here in Fort Wayne, our health commissioner, Dr. Deborah McMahan, held an emergency meeting with mental health providers, advocates and other concerned stakeholders about the reality in Allen County. Between 2014 and 2017, we had a 50 percent increase in the suicide rate. She said this should be unacceptable, likened this to our version of the Ebola crisis and wanted to know what we were going to do about it. Most of us in the room were stunned.

Stop Suicide Northeast Indiana, a coalition of key stakeholders, has been working tirelessly with no funding to raise awareness and take action in a variety of ways. We've launched a website; we've designed toolkits to help those showing warning signs, thinking about suicide or facing the loss of a loved one from suicide; we've established a speakers' bureau; we've brought in experts to help those on the front lines build expertise; and we hold an annual candlelight ceremony to honor those lost to suicide.

Our most recent project has been to establish a common language in our community around suicide by asking every agency, school and provider to adopt a heavily researched tool – the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale Screener – that helps us measure suicide risk and triage into appropriate care those who need it. Even parents can use this tool with their children.

But there is so much more to do – much of which *anyone* can do. I extend Dr. McMahan's challenge to each of you. Pick at least one thing from the following list and commit to doing it this week – or better yet, make some of these a habit.

- Learn the warning signs for suicide (see sidebar) and post these and the Lifeline number in a workplace newsletter, church bulletin, etc.
- Notice who might be struggling in your life and actively listen to how they are feeling about their struggles, what they've been doing to cope and what you might do to help. If they express painful feelings such as wanting to give up, resist the temptation to explain away their feelings, compare their plight to others, list ways they could fix their problems or bring up all the wonderful things they have going on in their life. All of these signal to the other person that you aren't listening and will shut them down.
- Support the #BeThere campaign by allowing Thunderclap ([//www.thunderclap.it/projects/70402-bethere-to-prevent-suicide](http://www.thunderclap.it/projects/70402-bethere-to-prevent-suicide)) to send out messaging through your social media accounts this week about preventing suicide.
- If you are struggling in your life, especially with suicidal thoughts, don't struggle alone. Reach out to those in your life who are supportive listeners. Talking is therapeutic.
- Put the following in your cellphone: the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline phone number, 800-273-8255 (TALK), and text "CSIS" to 839863. These tools can save your life or someone else's.
- Bring someone you know who has had a loss from suicide to the annual Candlelight Ceremony for Survivors of Suicide Loss to honor those lost to suicide at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Venderly Bridge on Purdue Fort Wayne's campus (bit.ly/2w8heRX); attend Purdue Fort Wayne's Suicide Prevention Week activities ([//1039sunnyfm.com/purdue-fort-wayne-to-hold-events-for-suicide-prevention-week/](http://1039sunnyfm.com/purdue-fort-wayne-to-hold-events-for-suicide-prevention-week/)); or attend the Out of Darkness walk on Sept. 30 at Headwaters Park.
- Watch a short video on how to use the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale screener (www.cssrs.columbia.edu).
- Learn about the Sources of Strength program (www.sourcesofstrength.org) implemented in 18 area middle and high schools throughout the region through the Lutheran Foundation. Review the wheel of strengths and figure out which strengths you could improve in your life.
- Attend Fort Wayne Community Schools'/Parkview's free Question, Persuade, Refer suicide prevention training from 6-8 p.m. Sept. 26 at the FACE Center (260-467-7260 to register).
- Encourage open dialogue about mental illness and suicide. The more we can break down the stigma, the more likely those who are suffering will reach out for help.
- Spread love and connection out into the world. Hug your loved ones and tell them no matter what they are going through, you are always available for them.
- Get involved. Attend Stop Suicide Northeast Indiana's next meeting, 11:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Oct. 8 at Chad's House, behind the Carriage House at 3327 Lake Ave.