

Suicide: Another curve in need of flattening

By Thomas E. Ellis

As if the medical, economic and social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic weren't already enough, another toll may follow like a black shadow: suicide. Chris Vognar (A10, April 2) wrote a courageous and inspiring message about managing suicidal thoughts related to his struggle with depression and loss. The ability of human beings to cope with adversity is truly remarkable; yet circumstance sometimes take adversity to unforeseen levels.

Suicide has increased more than 33 percent since 2000, now taking the lives of over 47,000 Americans per year. To make matters worse, the current pandemic carries with it a toxic mix of ingredients known to increase suicides: severe stress, loss of loved ones, economic insecurity, disconnection from others (social distancing) and guns. It is said that the only thing worse than severe emotional pain is to feel alone in that pain. Add a highly lethal means of self-destruction to the mix – guns have been selling lately at record pace – and the stage is set for the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S. to become even more severe.

Almost 10 million Americans per year strongly consider suicide. If suicide is on your mind, you might start by reminding yourself that almost everyone living through this pandemic shares your sorrow over loss and fears regarding what might lie



Jason Fochtman / Staff photographer

Residents leave words of support in Conroe's Rivershire neighborhood.

ahead. The current situation is nothing short of catastrophic, including not only thousands of deaths and overwhelmed care providers, but also severe damage to the world economy that will likely take years to repair. The message "you are not alone" resonates on many levels. At the same time, as we learned during Hurricane Harvey and other disasters, Texans, whether a family member, neighbor, crisis worker or clergy member, are always eager to help. Above all, remember that this will pass, and that we as individuals and a collective will emerge the stronger for it.

If you are suicidal and own firearms, please ask a friend or relative to hold them until brighter days arrive. This is not a gun rights issue, but a safety issue. Suicidal urges tend to come and go in waves over relatively brief time periods; but a gun can forever extinguish any opportunity for such

a wave to recede. Simply delaying a suicidal impulse (say, until the sun comes up) can be life-saving. Distractions such as video games, engrossing movies and phone conversations all can help one to buy time. Physical activity in particular is both a great distraction and a proven way of both maintaining physical health and boosting mood. You might also Google "self-compassion," where you can learn proven methods to counter self-criticism with kindness and self-nurturing activities.

Also know that, in addition to steadfastly hanging on during difficult periods (sometimes referred to as "white-knuckling"), the wish to live is greatly enhanced by actively pursuing a life worth living. Just as there is no panacea for suicide, there is also no one-size-fits-all guide for a life worth living, except to pursue one's own cherished values. Values vary tremendously from one person to another; examples include family connection, creative pursuits such as music or art, physical fitness, spiritual connection, sports, communing with nature or helping others. The last of these is a particular opportunity for a rich win-win experience.

If you have trouble naming your values, don't despair; this sometimes is easier said than done. However, talking with a wise and caring other can be tremendously helpful. Counseling or psychotherapy literally can mean the difference between life and death. In addition, your medical doctor can discuss with you medications that

might stabilize or improve your emotional state. If these are not available to you, there are many other opportunities for connection. For example, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-TALK) is available 24/7 free of charge; highly trained operators will listen and connect you with local helpers and resources. If you prefer texting, text HOME to 74741.

If you are doing well during this crisis, there is much that you can do for others, in the same spirit as checking on a neighbor during a national disaster. If someone you care about is noticeably struggling, whether directly expressing wishes to be dead or showing less direct signs, such as increased drinking or uncharacteristic social withdrawal, ask how they are getting along. Willingness to ask this question sincerely and to listen fully to the answer can bring great comfort, even in absence of solutions to problems. You can also share the above information, so that your friend or loved one can follow up with trained professionals, if appropriate. Throughout, maintain the mantra that we truly are all in this together.

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