



# Can We Reduce Our High Rate of Suicide in Cecil County?

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

Health Resources in Action, the consultant hired to analyze our county's substance abuse issues, recently reported on the high rate of drug overdose deaths in Cecil County. This rate was cause for alarm and has been addressed in numerous public meetings since the report came out in June.

The same report also noted that Cecil County had the highest per capita suicide rate compared to all counties in the state. Clearly, this is another significant problem that we need to address.

In our county, we average about 16 suicide deaths per year. More than half of these are committed by firearms. Most of the victims are men, are Caucasian, and range in age from their mid-twenties to early sixties.

This pattern is consistent with national averages. The most susceptible group appears to be middle-aged white men. The only thing unusual when comparing Cecil County to national averages is our high rate of suicide.

So what can help? Let's start with community education. This may be the best way to go.

For one thing, this can help us to identify risk factors in individuals. Here are some common risk factors for suicide:

Ongoing or general risk factors in individuals:

- Previous suicide attempts.
- Previous suicidal thoughts or talking about suicide.
- Previous or current mental health diagnosis. This is associated with increased vulnerability.
- Previous trauma or abuse. This includes symptoms of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) among soldiers returning from action as well as PTSD due to experiences of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse.
- Previous acts of violent behavior.
- Chronic pain

Contributory risk factors:

- Easy access to a firearm.
- Unemployment.
- Increased stress. This includes family stress as well as job stress.

Recent or specific risk factors:

- Excessive use of substances.
- Anger or other strong emotions.
- Depression.

- Withdrawal from activities.
- Impulsivity
- Belief that the current situation cannot change, that things will never get better.
- Recently divorced or separated.

So how can you help? Here are some interventions to consider:

If someone talks with you about suicide, listen. Turn yourself into a supportive listener. Relate emotionally with the person. Note “how difficult it is to feel like that.”

When having such a conversation, look for three things. Does the person have a plan? Does he or she have the means to carry out that plan? Do they have a timeline? If yes to the first two questions, that means additional resources are needed so you should encourage the person to seek professional help. How hard you push on the person to get help comes from the third question; if your friend is planning to do something right away, then calling 911 or persuading them to go directly to an emergency facility is the best course of action. Don’t leave them alone. Make sure you or someone else can stay with the person until they get emergency help. If they are thinking about doing something at an unspecified point in the future, it is not the same level of emergency and while professional help is still in order, contacting a supportive family member or friend to help is also a reasonable short term plan.

One of the best kinds of professional help is mental health therapy. Studies show that 90% of people who commit suicide have symptoms of mental illness. Mental health therapy has been proven to make a difference. It can assist a person to work through their issues.

What about the risk factor concerning the use of substances? Sometimes people turn to alcohol or drugs to dull their emotional pain but this may also lower their inhibitions and increase the likelihood that they may make a suicide attempt.

If you think someone is considering suicide, it’s okay to ask them if they are. They will appreciate the invitation to talk if they are actually considering suicide and they would probably not be offended if they aren’t. It is also a myth to think that someone who talks about suicide isn’t serious about it.

Sometimes a person who tells you about suicidal thoughts will ask you to keep it secret. Don’t agree to this as there may be a life at stake. You really need to tell someone. You may need to advise the person’s parents or significant other, or even the police.

If you want to learn more about mental health, mental illness, risk assessment, and resources, take a Mental Health First Aid class. These are available in Cecil County. Contact Upper Bay Counseling or the Health Department’s Core Service Agency to find out when a class is scheduled.

In terms of mental health therapy, many treatment agencies (including Upper Bay Counseling,) now offer “Urgent Care” visits which can be set up for the same day or the very next day.

Here's another option available around the clock. You can call, or have the person call, the National Suicide Hotline. The number is **800-273-TALK (8255)**. Another option is the local suicide hotline. For the Eastern Shore, that number is **888-407-8018**.

It's true that suicide attempts can be averted. By following the above guidelines, you can help. And just remember, there are services available. Be sure to recommend mental health services which have been shown to be the most successful in helping people with suicidal thoughts.

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*Rich Bayer, Ph.D.*, is the CEO of Upper Bay Counseling and Support Services, Inc. and a practicing psychologist.

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