

# Breaking the taboo

## Suicide prevention efforts underway in Weld County

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WELD COUNTY – When Matt Kramer’s wife died by suicide over two years ago, he was overwhelmed by grief.

“I thought about killing myself every day,” Kramer said.

He tried “drinking the pain away” for about a year, but then he decided to take a look at his self-destructive behavior.

“Grieving is a form of depression, but if you medicate yourself, you can’t get through your grief,” he said. “For me, it’s like the dry heaves – something you need to get out but can’t.”

Kramer said there is a tipping point between one’s control over depression, one that “may take your life.” But he avoided that tipping point by joining a suicide support group in Longmont, which he credits with saving his life, and channeling his grief into positive actions to help others. He has planted several “Reading Trees” at local schools in honor of his wife, Gail Mantych, an educator who was passionate about the importance of teaching kids to read.

“If you just teach kids to read, they can do anything,” Kramer said.

He also has the goal of creating “Wellness Rooms” at libraries, a place where people with mental illness or suicidal tendencies can feel comfortable learning about the information and resources that can help them. He said people can feel worried about going to the doctor

not only for fear of an unwelcome diagnosis, but from insurance concerns.

“People aren’t getting help because they’re afraid,” Kramer said. “People need to learn how to help themselves. There’s a lot of information out there.”

The Suicide Education and Support Services of Weld County is one major source of information for the community. The nonprofit organization has the mission to educate the public about suicide and to provide support to those who have lost someone to suicide.

“Suicide is not unique to any one kind of person,” said Patty Lloyd, postvention coordinator at SESS.

However, survivors of suicide and people suffering from depression are at high risk, she said. In fact, depression is the No. 1 warning sign, particularly if it goes untreated. Mental illness often plays a factor as well.

“We say that depression is a mental illness,” Lloyd said.

Some warning signs for being at risk include: a major change in physical appearance, excessive sleeping or lack of sleep, a change in eating habits, drug and alcohol use, a fascination with death, a drop in grades and not being interested in hobbies or other favorite activities, Lloyd said.

The best thing to do if a friend or family member displays the warning signs and seems suicidal is to take them to the nearest hospital and have an evaluation done at the emergency facility, she said. If the person is unwilling to go the medical center,

concerned friends can call the police department and request a “welfare check,” in which an officer will go to their home and assess the situation, possibly taking the suicidal person into protective custody if they seem unsafe.

“It is a preventable problem,” Lloyd said. “There’s a lot of hope. I’ve gone with numerous people to the hospital.”

But, she added, “We’ve lost a lot of people too.”

People who have lost a loved one to suicide can call SESS to learn about the support groups they offer, including Heartbeat, a monthly drop-in group open to the public that meets on the third Tuesday of each month at their office in Evans.

“Call us and we will make sure that you get help and meet other people that know what you’re going through,” Lloyd said.

There is also an eight-week program for survivors called Heart to Heart, which is more structured than the Heartbeat meetings.

“They make a commitment to each other to be there for the eight weeks,” she said.

Afterward, survivors can attend a speaker training program to learn how to spread awareness about suicide prevention at schools and service groups. SESS can also arrange for Special Heartbeats groups, which are often support groups for kids who have lost a friend at school.

In an effort to stop teen suicide, SESS offers a program called Safe Teen to area high schools. In the first day, survivors share their stories with the students, usually in health class. Sometimes students can relate to what they hear.

“Very often there will be a student in the class that will come up afterwards and say, ‘I’ve been thinking about suicide and you’ve brought it to my attention. Could you get me help?’ It happens more than you would imagine,” Lloyd said.

Safe Teen also has a person share facts about suicide, and a counselor meets with the students to try to dispel myths about what happens to kids who decide to go into treatment, which would be therapy through Youth Passages, a program for kids aged 12 to 17 (18 if they’re still in high school) offered by North Colorado Medical Center.

Often that counselor is Janaque

McDonough, a behavioral health case worker at the medical center. She said often they have a “horror movie” misconception of what therapy will be like, such as straightjackets and padded rooms.

“It is nothing like that: we don’t have a nurse named Helga with a unibrow chasing patients around with needles,” McDonough said.

She said the teens are usually surprised to learn that treatment at the hospital includes music, drama and art therapy. There are also group talks where participants share their feelings, as well as education and discussions of subjects like emotions. There’s even a recording studio where patients can record original songs with help from staff.

“I’ll ask the kids, ‘Does this sound like what you thought of when you thought of therapy?’ It just makes it easier to send their friends or themselves to get help,” she said. “I tell the kids our whole purpose is we want to give you hope.”

Youth Passages offers a day-treatment program as well as inpatient, where kids stay overnight and have therapy activities from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Parents also attend classes to learn the same communication and coping skills their kids do.

McDonough said that Youth Passages works with people to figure out “what changes can I make in my life so that I can have a life that I want to live?”

“We want to give them hope,” she said. “They don’t have to choose to end their life. They can have the life that they want to live.”

For Kramer’s part, though he still faces challenges with grief over his wife’s death, he is gradually healing.

“I got the wind knocked out of me when Gail died, but I’m slowly getting better every day. It’s been an interesting journey,” Kramer said.

He had this message for people who are thinking about suicide: “Talk to someone.”

*For more information about the Suicide Education and Support Services of Weld County, visit [www.endsuicide.org](http://www.endsuicide.org). For more information about the Youth Passages program, call 970-336-4924.*

### Get or give help for suicide

Seek help as soon as possible by contacting a mental health professional or by calling the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK if you or someone you know exhibits any of the following signs:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, available pills or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities – seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped – like there’s no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Feeling anxious, agitated or unable to sleep or sleeping all the time
- Experiencing dramatic mood changes
- Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life

Source: *The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*