

Raising awareness

BY BRIAN LOCKHART

How desperate must you be that taking your own life seems to be the only viable option?

That's a question that can only be answered by someone who has committed suicide or has attempted to end it all.

World Suicide Prevention Day will take place on September 10, with an emphasis on awareness and prevention.

Several years ago I was working on a story about suicide prevention and did a lot of research on the subject including statistics and methods by region and country. My research took me to a report by a world renowned expert ? a coroner and forensic expert in the U.S. - who had spent 30 years both working in the field as an investigator and researching the subject.

It was a fascinating read, and the results of this research are astounding.

More people die by suicide world wide in a single year than all deaths caused by wars, murders, and accidents combined in that same year. Statistics vary, but globally, the numbers are from 800,000 to an estimate of around 3 million people who end their own lives annually.

Some countries have much high rates than others.

Statistically, by the time you read this, six people in Ontario have already killed themselves today.

However, those statistics don't record the true numbers.

Around half of all suicides are never reported as 'death by own hand,' and there is a good reason for this.

Quite often investigators at the scene of a sudden death complete their investigation and even though all indicators point to a self-inflicted incident, they will quietly list the cause of death as 'accident' or 'misadventure.' This isn't done to cover anything up, it's done to spare a family the trauma of having 'suicide' listed on a death certificate and maybe help them cope with a sudden loss.

No one wants to believe a loved one intentionally killed themselves and thus inflicted such pain on their family.

Sometimes a suicide is painfully obvious. Other times the act is completed with no note left behind, no indication of personal strife, and no apparent reason.

This forensic expert gave several examples where suicide is obvious to investigators but it is easier and less painful to record it as an accident.

We've all read the stories where a person has died in a 'gun cleaning' accident. However, this forensic expert has tried several variations of cleaning a rifle and could find no part of the process that would lead to an accidental discharge. As he reported, in over 30 years of investigating these 'accidents', not once did he have a gun cleaning incident where a person accidentally shot themselves in the foot or hand ? it was always an 'accidental' shot through a vital organ.

Suicide prevention agencies do what they can to assist people who are considering ending their lives, but in the end that person makes their own decision.

The question that always remains, is why?

Obviously some people suffer from a mental illness that eventually leads them to taking this route rather than live with the demons that haunt them on a daily basis.

But for others, the act seems to come from nowhere and with no obvious indicators of a person's intentions.

Fortunately I have not had first hand experience with someone I know that took their own life, and I hope I never do.

A friend of mine recounted a story about a family she knows. The grandfather of this clan excused himself after dinner during a family gathering saying he forgot to do something 'back at the house.'

When he didn't return and didn't answer the telephone, a family member went to check only him only to find him hanging in the basement. He left a note saying only 'it's better this way.'

Prior to this, there was no indication that he was ill, despondent, or otherwise unhappy in life.

It was an utter shock to a family who still have no understanding of why this occurred.

World Suicide Prevention Day hopes to bring awareness to the issue and of course hopefully prevent someone from choosing a path that is irreversible.

Maybe the outreach from this day will at least let some people know that there is always another option.