

Center for Suicide Awareness helps people struggling with suicidal thoughts

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KAUKAUNA — Driven by her faith and desire to help people, Barb Bigalke works to give people hope. In 2010, she started the nonprofit Center for Suicide Awareness, located at St. Paul Elder Services in Kaukauna.

Barb Bigalke, pictured at Sacred Heart Church in Appleton, is founder of the Center for Suicide Awareness in Kaukauna. The center offers support groups for people of all ages. (Brad Birkholz | For The Compass)

The center offers support groups for all ages to those who have lost a loved one to suicide, or who have attempted suicide, and for veterans. It also provides training for educators, health care professionals, police and others. The center also hosts AA meetings and has a counselor on-site. There also are a lending library and classes, such as Coloring for Depression. All programs are listed on the center's website at centerforsuicideawareness.org. The staff is made up of paid employees and volunteers — lots of volunteers, Bigalke said.

Bigalke, a Catholic, worked as a crisis counselor and headed the crisis team with law enforcement after completing her college degrees in human development, family studies and education. After someone she knew died by suicide, she learned how little support there was for survivors of suicide and developed the center.

A big part of her mission these days is educating the community about recognizing the signs of suicide and how to help people regain hope. It also involves outreach to families of victims of suicide and those who have suicidal thoughts and feelings. She gives presentations to schools and community and church groups.

On Jan. 12, Bigalke shared her expertise at the Janssen Forum at Mount Tabor Center in Menasha. She showed how suicide is a growing problem today.

For example, she said, the suicide rate in the Fox Valley is the highest in the state; 31 veterans a day commit suicide. "The group with the highest number of suicides that we see is middle-aged men. That rate tripled last year. They are fathers, sons, yet they are dying at a fast rate."

The reason, she said, is the economy. In the past, people went to work and worked until they wanted to retire. "It's a different world today. When you lose your job at age 55, what are you going to do? We identify with our jobs, so when you are suddenly unemployed, what happens? What do you say when you look in the mirror? Is it positive?"

She tells her audience to call on God's grace and mercy.

"Grace is the ability to say to ourselves, 'I'm doing the best I can. I am good enough,'" she explained. "How many of you, once a month, say one nice thing about yourself?"

Her prayer, she said, is "for everyone to have a kinder heart. The lack of kindness seems to be an epidemic these days."

It is the teens, though, for whom she feels the most concern. "Suicide is the second leading cause of death among our teens. Kids are becoming too accustomed to having someone they know die from suicide," she said.

To help them cope — or to avoid suicide, Bigalke and the center created a Hopeline in 2014. This is a "text-in" line (rather than a voice call-in). Like all the services at the center, it is free. It is available around the clock every day of the year. People simply text the number 741741 to the Hopeline.

"They can use it for anything: emotional support, finding a resource or information. It is available to all ages," she said. Use of the Hopeline went up 82 percent in December with the holidays.

“If (friends or family members) are talking about it, get them to help. Call the police and let them handle it,” she said. “If someone says to me they don’t want to get help because my friend may get mad at me, I say, but they are still alive. Just getting involved is important, and don’t underestimate the value of listening.”

The Center for Suicide Awareness is located at 316 E. 14th St. in Kaukauna. It is funded entirely through grants and donations.

Warning signs of suicide

These are the warning signs of suicide, according to Barb Bigalke:

- Isolation. “This is true for any age. Is someone becoming more and more isolated from people?”
- Perfectionism. “People see good or bad with no in-between. An A-student gets a B and can’t handle it.”
- Talking about suicide. When someone talks about it, take it seriously.
- Dramatic mood changes. “Someone who is usually pretty happy is suddenly down or depressed, or someone who has been down and unhappy is suddenly up. That may be because he or she knows the end is near.”
- Giving things away. Things that are important to them, such as their pet or clothes or a personal item that holds special meaning for them.

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