

Making a Difference

suicide prevention program comes from near tragedy

By Angelina Montemurro, MD.

Blessings can come out of terrible situations.

I am a physician and mother of three sons. Last year my eldest, Albert, was nearing graduation from the UW-Madison Business School, with a Fortune 500 job secured.



A successful student with good grades, he was involved in organizations and had many friends. My family and I had regular contact with him and had no idea he was planning to kill himself. His near fatal overdose happened the night before his graduation. We consider it a miracle that he's alive today - divine intervention - and that is why I share my personal experience with you - with the hope that my story will help others.

Like many suicidal people, he hid his depression from those who loved him - knowing we would intervene. While he spent more time with us, he was quietly preparing to leave us permanently; giving away prized possessions and saying his goodbyes.

This experience taught us many lessons. Family members of suicidal individuals are often the last to know they are suffering, especially when they are away from home. Help is needed by people with day-to-day contact who notice changes in their patterns and demeanor - teachers, classmates, roommates, and friends.

Albert dabbled in suicide several times before this near success. First, he overdosed on prescription drugs and alcohol on his birthday after spending the day with us. He also had a gun and was building up courage to shoot himself. These decisions were premeditated.

His depression developed because of loss

and serious health issues of his loved ones. In eighteen months, his brother, cousin and stepmother battled Cancer. I suffered a stroke and required heart surgery. His grandmother and grandfather died within a month of each other and his longtime girlfriend left him for his best friend. We dealt with our grief as a family, but Albert kept his feelings from us.

He stopped attending classes and withdrew socially on campus, however, due to confidentiality rules, we were never notified. We did not see him change, but those around him did.

A close friend of mine lost her son to suicide while attending UW-Madison. My desire to spare others the loss of their loved ones prompted me to take action. I contacted the university and suggested a campus-wide suicide awareness program, hoping to educate and encourage involvement and offer an avenue of intervention for those noticing warning signs of people at risk.

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The mnemonic to help individuals recognize students at risk:

- S - social isolation
- U- unwilling attitude
- I - incomplete assignments
- C - career changing
- I - irritability
- D- drinking/drugs/diet changes
- E - exhaustion

Social Isolation: A person stops returning calls; being active on Facebook. You invite them over and they don't show up or call. They seem to disappear from their usual hangouts - fraternity/sorority houses, library, etc.

Unwilling Attitude: They say 'no' a lot. Nothing seems to make them happy. They are increasingly negative with people and about ideas and are stubborn when questioned to explain their positions, etc.

Incomplete Assignments: They stop going to classes and miss tests - **this is a big sign.** They don't study with friends or participate in group assignments anymore.

Career Changing. They stop talking about the job they have lined up and suddenly

mention an interest in a different line of work. They quit their college job, or their job performance declines and they don't care.

Irritability. They are irritable and pick fights. They are less forgiving in their speech patterns, yell a lot, cry a lot.

Drinking/Drugs/Diet Changes. They drink excessively, and/or are doing drugs. They suddenly gain or lose significant weight; skipping meals regularly, or binge eating.

Exhaustion. They sleep a lot but are tired all the time, and spend a lot of time in their rooms.

If a student, teacher, friend or associate notices any of these changes in a student, they may be able to prevent a suicide, or a violent act towards other people.

The University now has a 24-hour hotline staffed with professionals and hopes to take its program to campuses across the country. They are working on a computer-based program to train individuals on ways to talk to a suicidal person. Teachers are now contacting students who miss classes or significant tests. These changes are already saving lives.

I encourage all groups to come up with a program to help people who may be suffering within their communities. All segments of society - armed forces, law enforcement

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agencies, high pressured organizations and individuals going through hardship are at risk. It would save lives if we could implement awareness programs and become more involved.

Albert has started a student organization to increase suicide awareness and prevention at UW Madison, which is growing daily.

We have taken this divine gift - Albert's spared life - to help save the lives of others. You can too. Each life saved is a blessing. ❁

Angelina Montemurro, MD has been a family physician of a large practice for over 23 years in her hometown of Kenosha, WI. For more information, or to support this program, call her at 262.577.8400.