**Twelve Must-Know Myths About Suicidal Clients**

*Mental health professionals often harbor myths about suicidal individuals that could prove downright deadly.*

Recently, I was invited to lecture on suicide prevention to a college class in adolescent psychology: The professor introduced me, listened intently to the first few moments of my lecture, and then made her exit. She did not return until the end of my speech.

As I was collecting my handouts she said, "Say, Rosenthal, you did a pretty good job. I heard a few students talking in the hall and they seemed to like your lecture.” I thanked her but was totally unprepared for what came next.  
"You did make one rather glaring error," she said.  
"Glaring error? I'm afraid I don't understand."  
"Well, you made the statement that people who die by suicide generally talk about suicide. I remember hearing years ago that this is a myth." "Actually,” I explained, "years ago we were taught to believe that people who are suicidal don't talk about it, but today we know better. We know that a high percentage of individuals who attempt suicide did talk about it.

The professor looked perplexed, anxious, and was visibly upset. "Well, that couldn't be true. But if it is, I need to take this seriously." The good professor handed me a note that a student had slid under her office door while my lecture was in progress. The note stated that the student was depressed and contemplating suicide. I urged the professor — who had planned on not intervening due to her antiquated misinformation about suicide -- to contact the student and everything turned out for the best.

The bottom line: Mental health professionals (yes, even professors in our field), and more specifically addiction counselors, often harbor myths about suicidal individuals that could prove downright deadly.

**Myth 1: Suicidal people don't give warning signs.**  
**Fact:** Nearly everybody who attempts or successfully commits suicide communicates his or her intent. The person may talk about suicide, repeatedly joke about it, write about it, place messages on Internet chat rooms, or even draw pictures related to death. Others give away prized possessions. Experts now believe that 75 to 80 percent of all people give warning signs.

**Myth 2: Suicide occurs around the holidays.**  
**Fact:** To be sure, if a suicide occurs on a holiday, it is more likely to get media attention.  
Nevertheless, December generally checks in as the lowest month for suicide in the United States. In fact, some suicidologists have noted that all major holidays have a lower rate of suicide than other days of the year.

**Myth 3: Suicide occurs more frequently in the dark, dreary days of winter.**  
**Fact:** Totally false! Most suicides occur in the spring. May rates are generally the highest.

**Myth 4: Suicide is primarily a teenage problem.**  
**Fact:** Indeed, teen suicide is a problem. The rate of teen suicide is about three times what it was in the 1960s. However, the suicide rate in women continues to rise until it peaks at about age 51 and then it plateaus. In men, the suicide rate keeps increasing with age. A 60-year-old man is more apt to take his own life than is a 50-year-old man and so on.  
The rate of geriatric suicide (ages 65 and older) is nearly three times the rate of the general population.

**Myth 5: Most people leave a suicide note that explains the nature of their a**ct.

**Fact:** Only 15 to 25 percent of those who commit suicide leave a note. Moreover, these documents often tell us little about why the person decided to take his or her own life.

**Myth 6: Clients who live in big cities are under more stress and are more likely to kill themselves.**  
**Fact:** Surprise! The suicide rate is clearly higher in sparsely populated rural areas.  
Densely populated states such as New Jersey or Washington D.C. have rates that are much lower than those of states such as Wyoming or Nevada that have fewer people per square mile.

**Myth 7: Media stories about suicide and the economy do not affect the suicide rate.**  
**Fact:** Researchers have known for a long time that the suicide rate goes down during extended newspaper strikes. When a famous person takes their own life, the rate increases at a statistically significant level. Suicide, I might add, is a good barometer of the economy. In troubled economic times, such as the Great Depression of 1929, the suicide rate skyrocketed.

**Myth 8: The grief surrounding a suicide is just like any other grief.**  
**Fact:** In most cases survivors (i.e., those who have lost a friend or loved one to suicide) have a tougher time coping with grief. When an individual dies via suicide, the survivors cannot blame a virus or a drunk driver. Suicide prevention centers often provide special survivors of suicide groups to help those who are grieving deal with the loss.

**Myth 9: The suicide rate goes up in times of war.**  
**Fact:** In reality, the suicide rate plummets during times of war.

**Myth 10: Never ask a person if they are suicidal as you could put the idea in their head.**  
**Fact:** This is one of the most pernicious myths of all time! Make it a point to ask each of your clients if they are suicidal.

**Myth 11: Once a person's depression lifts, the situation isn't as dangerous.**  
**Fact:** Many, if not most persons suicide after the depression lifts, ergo this could be the most dangerous time. Most treatment centers now have aftercare or continuing care groups to help deal with this paradoxical reality.

**Myth 12: Don't bother giving the suicidal individual the number of the local suicide prevention hotline if the client insists, they won't call the number.**  
**Fact:** Don't buy it! Many people who insist they would never call a hotline do decide to make the call after all. Make it a point to give all your suicidal clients the number of a suicide prevention hotline.

Suicide is the eighth leading killer of all people and generally checks in as the second or third top killer of teens. We talk a lot about the horrors of homicide in the United States and to be sure homicide is a horrendous problem. Nevertheless, suicide year in and year out causes more deaths than homicide, Moreover, nearly every study ever conducted conclusively shows that the suicide rate among individuals with addictions and substance abuse problems dwarfs that of the general population.

I have provided this information as a crash course in emotional lifesaving because what you don't know can hurt your clients.

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Note: We now have 988 as a resource suicidal individuals can call or text 24/7 in a suicidal crisis. This was not true at the time this article was written.