People give many reasons for wanting to take their own lives. The bottom line, however, is that someone will commit suicide when they have lost all hope that things will get better — when they are in a state of despair and isolation with no sign of hope. Social support is the only chance they have of relieving their pain. This is an incredibly lonely place to be. Supportive connections to other people — to society as a whole, to groups, and to individuals — is a buffer that helps protect us from slipping into the ultimate hopelessness and loneliness that leads to suicide.

Consider the following:

• A 75 year Harvard study has demonstrated, “Good relationships keep us happy and healthier, period.”

• Another study in Maricopa County, Arizona began back in the 1990s and found that “People who were disconnected from others were roughly three times more likely to die during the nine year study than people with strong social ties.”

• Other research shows that there is a positive correlation between more time spent on social media and higher rates of unhappiness and loneliness. On the flip side, there is no evidence that more time spent with others in person and greater happiness.

Although there may often be other interventions needed to help someone overcome hopelessness and to guard against suicide, being in healthy relationships with others is a key protective factor.

How does connection with others help?

• Close relationships with others helps put problems into perspective. When we are connected to others, our problems are not as threatening, not as big, often shown to be a burden when viewed in isolation.

• People who are contemplating ending their own life often will not reach out to others for support. Making close ties to others ensures a greater chance that others will be reaching out to the person who is feeling suicidal. This can elicit saving and those who have professional intervention may be needed. Friends and family members who are actively involved in the lives of those who are depressed are known as gatekeepers. They often are the first ones to become aware that an individual is at risk and they frequently have the first opportunity to get help.

• Close, positive interactions with others can help to ward off feelings of loneliness. Close relationships with our families, especially when established early in life, can produce a greater sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Another study in Alameda County, California begun back in 1965 concluded, “Close relationships with others is a key protective factor.

• Strong involvement in our communities can bring with it a greater understanding of purpose and meaning in life. It can provide opportunities for meaningful achievement, in turn, gives us a healthy view of ourselves.

• Overall, socially connected people achieve greater fulfillment of basic human needs such as love, belonging, a feeling of accomplishment, and the need for safety and security.

So, how can you be there to provide helpful social support to someone who is depressed or who may be suicidal?

• Show up. Even if you feel your presence isn’t wanted, just being present with someone who is depressed sends a message, “You are worth it and you are important to me.”

• Don’t try to cheer someone up when they are depressed. This serves to reinforce the depressed individual’s idea that no one understands and further cements them in feelings of loneliness. Instead, acknowledge how painful or overwhelming life is for them.

• Be direct. Although it feels shocking and uncomfortable, rather than avoid the subject of suicide, it is better to come right out and ask, “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” It may feel like you will hurt your loved one’s feelings but this is very rarely the case. And, you cannot increase a person’s risk of suicide by bringing up the subject of suicide, it is better to come right out and ask, “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” It may feel like you will hurt your loved one’s feelings but this is very rarely the case. And, you cannot increase a person’s risk of suicide by bringing up the subject of suicide.

• Practice self-care and set boundaries. It is not okay for your loved one, regardless of how emotionally fragile they are, to be abusive to you in any way. Let them know that you are aware of their pain but also that they cannot call you names, curse you out, or physically hurt you. It is also not okay for your friend to expect you to be available all the time. This can alert loved ones and friends when professional intervention may be needed. Friends and family members who are actively involved in the lives of someone who is depressed or who may be suicidal?

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Finally, believe in the possibility of change. Even when you feel that all options have been exhausted, keep believing with the hopeless person that there is the hope of hope. If you continue to believe this, it makes it easier for them to believe it. Then start over at square one and just show up.