

# Two High Profile Suicides are Grim Reminders of a Growing Problem

By **Yamila Lezcano** - January 28, 2021

110

Amid the political turmoil this month were two high profile suicides that would have been altogether buried in the avalanche of politically partisan headlines but for the determination of the victims' families to share the story of their tragedies.

On New Year's Eve, the 25-year-old son of U.S. Representative Jamie Raskin (D-MD) took his life. His parents sought to make some sense of their loss by urging people to open their minds to discussion and help, especially when there are danger signals like depression, as was the case with their son. In the 18 to 25 age group, the number of young adults with suicidal thoughts is significantly higher than all other age groups, according to the American Association for Suicide Prevention.



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Just days later, 51-year-old U.S. Capitol Police Officer Howard Liebengood also committed suicide in the aftermath of the Washington D.C. insurrection. No reason was given, but a conflicting statement that he died in the line-of-duty fueled painful social media speculation about the specifics. In 2018, adult suicide rates were among the highest in the 45 to 54 and 52 to 59 age groups.

It's no secret that suicide presents a major challenge to public health in the United States and worldwide, claiming the lives of more than 48,000 Americans in 2018, or one death every 11 minutes. That same year, 10.7 million adults in the United States acknowledged they "seriously thought about" suicide, while 3.3 million made a suicide plan and 1.4 million actually attempted to end their lives, according to 2019 data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Fueling those numbers are the social, health-related, and economic impacts of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Concerns about physical distancing and strong feelings of social isolation are exacerbating loneliness and anxiety. All are major contributing factors to deteriorating mental health and suicidal behavior.

As with physical health challenges, mental health problems affect everyone. In fact, mental health problems are more prevalent than heart disease, lung disease, and cancer combined. During the past decade, nearly one in five adult Americans was estimated to have a diagnosable mental disorder, as noted by Mental Health First Aid, a national program that teaches skills to respond to the signs of mental illness and substance abuse.

Mental health challenges can be as debilitating as any other disease and correlate with premature death, loss of productivity, and other difficulties that negatively impact the quality of life. Although most people who have a mental health illness do not die by suicide, they are more likely to take their own lives than people who do not.

Suicide, like other human behaviors, has no single determining cause. Instead, it occurs in response to multiple biological, psychological, interpersonal, environmental, and societal influences that interact with one another, often over time, the CDC explains.

According to Mental Health First Aid, the 10 important signs that someone you love could be suicidal include the following:

1. Expressing hopelessness and no sense of purpose in life
2. Acting recklessly or engaging in risky activities, seemingly without thinking
3. Withdrawing from friends, family, or community
4. Showing dramatic mood swings for no apparent reason.
5. Expressing rage, anger, or the need to seek revenge
6. Feeling trapped; being anxious or agitated
7. Sleeping all the time, or being unable to sleep
8. Increasing alcohol and drug use
9. Talking or writing about death, dying, or suicide
10. Giving away prized possessions

In regard to young people, identifying whether a young person is simply developing normally or experiencing a mental health challenge can be tough to do since rapid changes brought by adolescence can cause many mental health changes to go unnoticed. Overall, with any age group, is important to note that every person feeling psychological distress

does not have a mental disorder, but they may fall along a continuum of good mental health and mental illness.

An enlightened approach to saving people of all ages from suicide begins with the universal acknowledgment that mental illness is, in fact, an illness, just like physical illness, and that we must respect and treat accordingly. The more people are educated about mental illnesses, the less there will be a stigma associated with it. Open discussion usually helps leads to effective treatment and, most importantly, saving lives.

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