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Becoming Resilient

SUICIDE

High-Profile Suicides Bring Attention to a Serious Public Health Concern

Examining risk factors for suicide in light of high-profile cases.

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KEY POINTS

- Often celebrities and elite athletes worry about confidentiality and fear judgment, which stops them from seeking help for mental health issues.
- Even without celebrity status, more than half of people with mental illnesses do not seek professional help for their challenges.
- Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for youth between ages 10 and 34 in the United States.
- A plethora of factors can trigger suicide, ranging from traumatic and difficult life events to limited social support to help one cope.

News of a high-profile suicide inundated headlines just a few weeks ago when former 2019 Miss USA Cheslie Kryst was found dead in New York. Only 30 years old, she had a promising career in the entertainment media industry ahead of her as a two-time Emmy-nominated correspondent on *Extra*, a highly popular national syndicated TV show that covers events, celebrities, and news.

Kryst was both beautiful and smart. Before her pageant career, she excelled in her academic career, graduating with both a Juris Doctor and MBA degree from Wake Forest University School of Law before working as an attorney licensed in North and South Carolina. After a few years of taking a break from pageants, a career that she started as a teenager, she decided to give it another try and, in 2019, she won the Miss USA pageant, qualifying among the top 10 finalists in the Miss Universe competition.



Cheslle Kryst

Source: Eugene Powers / Shutterstock

With so much to enjoy and feel proud of, what could have gone wrong?

Often, celebrities and elite athletes are concerned with issues of confidentiality and fear of judgment. They feel the pressure to present themselves as strong and well-collected, with a mindset that they are supposed to be able to handle mental health challenges on their own or within their families.

Even without celebrity status, more than half of people with mental illnesses do not seek professional help for their challenges. Unfortunately, most people avoid or delay reaching out for treatment, due to concerns about being treated differently as well as the apprehension of losing their jobs and livelihood. This is due to the existing stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against people who

suffer from mental illness.

In fighting this misconception, it is important to try and normalize conversations about how common mental health challenges are. In fact, they are more common than heart disease, lung disease, and cancer combined. Furthermore, *suicide is the second-leading cause of death for youth between ages 10 and 34 in the United States* and, sadly, that statistic has continued to increase during the past decade.

The effect of a high-profile suicide

When a high-profile celebrity suicide occurs, call centers for suicide and behavioral health agencies must prepare for a higher volume of calls by ensuring they maintain adequate resources to connect those in crisis with the help they need. In some instances, these suicide cases are highly publicized and may generate a big shock leading to a sudden spike in other suicides.

For example, when beloved comedian Robin Williams committed suicide on August 11, 2014, a group of researchers looked at death by suicide data from the Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and found that the expected average rate of these types of cases between August and December 2014 **increased**

from 16,849 to 18,690. Similarly, two-thirds of people who committed suicide immediately after Williams' death utilized the same method he did to cut their lives short. On a more positive note, the actor's death prompted more people to reach out for help, manifesting in an alarming 300 percent increase of calls for help.

Risk factors for suicide

Although most people who have a mental illness do not necessarily experience suicidal ideations, having a mental illness such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia could pose a risk for suicide. Of course, there is no one single variable in suicide, inasmuch as there are many other risk factors interacting with each other that could lead to such an event.

When we see cases like Cheslie Kryst in the news—someone who seemingly “had it all” from a common-sense point of view (youth, beauty, good education, and success) — many people probably asked themselves why someone like that would do such a thing. The reality is that there is no single answer to such a question.



Source: Shutterstock / SpeedKingz

A plethora of factors could trigger suicide, ranging from traumatic and difficult life events to limited social support to cope with such situations. However, having a mental health disorder represents the strongest risk factor. According to the CDC, *90 percent of people who commit suicide have experienced a mental health disorder*. Yet, most people living with mental

health challenges who receive professional help, treatment, and have a good support system can improve their quality of life and even find a resolution to their challenges.

The most common risk factors for suicide are lack of treatment or mistreatment but mostly lack awareness and the stigma attached to mental illness. Regrettably, that stigma is not just part of our culture, but universal. A study conducted in 2016 on stigma showed there is no country, society, or culture where those suffering a mental illness had the same societal value as people without mental illnesses. In addition, stigma triggers negative effects on recovery among people diagnosed with severe mental illnesses, thus leading to feelings of reduced hope, lower self-esteem, reduced likelihood of staying in treatment, and more difficulties at work.

Preventing and reducing suicide

On a closing note, the first step in preventing and reducing suicide is to continue raising awareness about it by educating the general population about common signs and symptoms of mental health issues and symptoms, as well as increasing resources for those in need.

If you or someone you love is contemplating suicide, seek help immediately. For help 24/7 contact the [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#), 1-800-273-TALK, or the [Crisis Text Line](#) by texting TALK to 741741. To find a therapist near you, see the [Psychology Today Therapy Directory](#).

References

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