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Averting Tragedy: World Suicide Prevention Day 2011

More than 3,500 Canadians die by suicide every year and, according to the World Health Organization, most of these deaths can be prevented. September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day, a good time to talk openly about a difficult subject, discuss solutions, and dispel common misperceptions. Attention on suicide has also been visible in the media with two recent suicides of NHL players.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people aged 15-24 in British Columbia. Up to 90% of people who die by suicide have a diagnosable mental disorder such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or an addiction. Appropriate treatment for these disorders lowers the risk of suicide, so it is essential that people with symptoms of a mental illness have access to treatment as quickly as possible.

People with a mental disorder are at increased risk of suicide

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Early response to symptoms of mental illness is always best

In most cases, signs and symptoms of mental illness appear well before a crisis requiring a 911 call or acute care intervention. Seldom, if ever, will a person lose control of thoughts, feelings and behaviour all of a sudden. Signs leading up to a crisis may include sleeplessness, inexplicable changes in functioning, social isolation, problems at work or in relationships, rapid decline in school work, vague signs of depression, anxiety, difficulty coping with stress, odd thoughts or behaviour, ritualistic preoccupation with certain activities, paranoia or unpredictable outbursts.

Those who receive early treatment almost always have better outcomes. It is better and kinder to the person with the illness to obtain treatment and support services as early as possible.

Family members or others with concerns should contact the support coordinator at the Family Support Centre, operated by the North Shore Schizophrenia Society (NSSS) but covering all serious mental illness. The Centre can provide background information, help determine if there is a reason for concern and outline appropriate steps to take. For those with an illness, a connection to Mental Health Services is important. Contact information is below.

Friends, neighbours, employers, landlords and service providers are also welcome to call NSSS for information, education sessions and advice if they are worried about someone. We work with people wherever they are, often family members in other provinces and sometimes other countries.

For immediate assistance for those who are thinking of hurting themselves, or are concerned about someone who may be in distress, call the 24-hour Crisis Centre Distress Line at 1-866-661-3311 or 1-800-784-2433 (Suicide). Families coping with serious mental illness of any kind should call the Family Support Centre at 604-926-0856 for personal support, education, and other programs. For the support group in Squamish call 604-898-9372. Information on all serious mental illness, Family Support Centre programs, and other resources is available at www.northshoreschizophrenia.org. VCH Mental Health and Addiction Services can be reached at 604-698-6455 in Whistler and 604-698-6491 in Pemberton. Child and Youth Mental Health can be reached at 604-894-2091 or 1-866-823-5374. For more information about suicide warning signs visit www.YouthInBC.com.

Communities that provide strong experiences of connectedness are important in the mental health and well-being of all people. Thus, communities that are well integrated and cohesive may be suicide and preventative. We encourage community members who are concerned, to reach out to one of the many services and supports available in our community. During Mental Illness Awareness Week (October 2-8) a number of public events and displays will take place to make information about suicide and mental illness readily available.

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