From Compassion to Action

Allyship for Equity in Suicide Prevention in Marin County

We invite you to dedicate this book in honor of someone meaningful in your life. It might be someone you lost to suicide, someone in recovery, or a person who you believe is a voice for compassion and action.

I AM DEDICATING THIS BOOK TO:

_____

Dear Reader,

Suicide is the 11th leading cause of death overall and the 2nd leading cause of death for youth in the United States. Over the past 20 years, nationwide suicide rates have increased prompting an urgent need for greater suicide prevention efforts and awareness.

In Marin County, we are proud to be one of the healthiest counties in the state. Despite this success, we continue to be impacted by suicide. Our reputation for health and wellness masks the complex stories of pain, loss, and inequities our community members often face.

Suicide is a complex and preventable health issue that affects everyone. However, not everyone has the same access to suicide prevention resources or support. A person's culture and experiences with inequality, for example, can strongly influence how a person views and receives mental health care.

Suicide prevention is not a "one-size fits all" approach. Having an understanding of factors, such as culture and inequity, means we can create better interventions for members of our community who are deeply impacted, including men and boys, youth, LGBTQIA+ people, older adults, and veterans.

Fortunately, hope surrounds us.

Everyday, more people are becoming allies in suicide prevention in Marin. Over the last five years, over 13,000 residents have participated in a suicide prevention or mental health training or event. Even though talking about suicide can be an uncomfortable topic, a recent community survey in Marin shows that most people want to help when someone has lost hope and learn how to talk about suicide with care and compassion. This promising news offers a path forward.

We can strengthen suicide prevention by building inclusive communities where everyone feels accepted and has access to help that reflects their different personal and cultural backgrounds. When equity, connection and compassion are at the center of our efforts, we give suicide prevention a better chance of meeting the needs of everyone.

There are many ways you can help in our community. Your role in suicide prevention can start by learning about risk factors, warning signs, or helping in times of crisis. It can also mean caring for a loved one, checking-in, or sharing knowledge in your community. This booklet is one tool to help you on your path toward compassion and action.

Todd Schirmer, Phd, CCHP
Director, Behavioral Health and Recovery Services

IF YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS IN DISTRESS, PLEASE CONTACT:

- Suicide Crisis & Lifeline: 988
- Línea de Prevención del Suicidio y Crisis: 988
- Crisis Text Line (text 'HOME' to 741741)
- Additional support resources can be found on the BHRS Prevention and Outreach website and on the last page of this book.

Equity In Suicide Prevention

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This booklet is an introductory guide to support your role as an ally in suicide prevention by building your skills, understanding, and language to help someone in distress. While it is not comprehensive, it describes the everyday ways a person experiences cultural or social factors that can shape a person's risk for mental health or suicidal distress. You might know someone who is struggling, has attempted suicide, or is a suicide loss survivor. If so, this booklet may be able to help you and those you love.

This booklet follows *From Compassion to Action: A Community Guide to Suicide Prevention and Support in Marin County.* Each can be used in discussion circles or trainings for healthcare or mental health providers, educators, and community leaders. Please join us in creating a community where everyone can lend a hand in saving lives in Marin.

This booklet is a product of Marin County Health and Human Services, Marin County Division of Behavioral Health and Recovery Services and the Marin County Suicide Prevention Collaborative.

KEY TERMS TO LEARN

CULTURE

Values, beliefs, traditions, languages, and behaviors common within a shared group identity. These cultural factors can inform how we communicate our feelings and respond to others when providing help or seeking help.

STIGMA

A set of negative, unfair or untrue beliefs that can lead to discrimination, judgement, or unfair attitudes that can interfere with a person asking for help.

EQUITY

Ensures everyone gets what they need to succeed for a happy and healthy life, such as a stable income, education, housing, and belonging. It recognizes that not everyone starts from the same place and that some people may face bigger obstacles than others.

INEQUITY

Describes the unfair and unequal experiences of certain groups of people based on political or social factors that prevent fair opportunities to health and happiness. Bias, racism, and discrimination can contribute to inequities that may influence mental health and suicide risk.

“If you’re unsure how someone is really doing, ask.

If their response feels automatic, gently ask again, in a way that’s genuine and inviting. Be prepared to stay present and spend the time it takes to truly listen. It’s important to acknowledge how difficult and painful life can be. For loss survivors, building resilience often means learning to sit with uncertainty and trusting that it’s possible for things to someday, somehow feel better. When I lost my son, I needed to know it was possible to survive, even though I didn’t yet know how. You can help survivors by creating a culture where people can share openly, honestly, without shame or dismissal, which is essential for healing.”

-A Suicide Loss Survivor from Marin County

BEING AN ALLY

An ally is someone who takes steps to support the well-being of those around them through words and actions. An ally:

LISTENS WITH THEIR WHOLE ATTENTION

Making time and clearing our schedule, stepping away from our screens, and finding a quiet place to talk can let the other person know we are really listening. Learning as much as you can about mental health can also help you be a better listener. Remind them that their mental health does not define them and you have their back. Learn warning signs, risk factors, and how to support someone in their darkest moments.

EXAMINES THEIR OWN ROLE AND PRIVILEGE

Fear of suicide and mental illness is often rooted in a lack of understanding. As an ally, see how your words, actions, and the spaces you share create belonging and acceptance for others who may be different from you. Consider donating to or volunteering for suicide prevention organizations to help create awareness and reduce stigma.

RAISES THE VOICES OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED

Try not to speak for others, and instead, listen and learn about the stories of those impacted by suicide. Support peer advocates, attempt survivors, loss survivors, and community members as they create change shaped by their own personal experiences.

NORMALIZES SEEKING HELP

You can do this by advocating for your own mental health and seeking support when you need it, which can encourage others to do the same. Letting a person know they can talk to you about mental health or suicide is also a great door opener for a conversation. It shows your empathy and understanding. Consider joining a local suicide loss survivor outreach team or participating in local mental health and cultural events in your community.

ADVOCATES FOR CHANGE AT VARYING LEVELS

Whether at home, in your community, or at a local level, your voice matters. Speaking up for justice at any level can help increase support for suicide prevention and mental health equity. Raise awareness about suicide prevention through things like social media, community events, and even at the dinner table with loved ones.

COMMUNITY STRENGTHS

Community strengths, including cultural or social values, traditions, or beliefs are an essential part of suicide prevention. Culture can influence suicide prevention in some of the following ways:

CULTURAL RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS VARY

What contributes to risk or protection for some cultures may be harmful or beneficial to others. Research has shown that factors such as close family/social ties and open communication can support mental health and well-being. You can understand someone better by asking, "In what ways does your cultural background or community support your mental health?"

WARNING SIGNS MAY APPEAR DIFFERENT

How we express our feelings or emotions can also vary by culture. Some cultures may be very open while others might be more withdrawn about discussing mental health. It may be acceptable or unacceptable to discuss mental health depending on the culture and environment. Asking, "How do you express signs of distress?" and "What do those signs look or feel like to you?" can help you learn how others show warning signs.

HELP-SEEKING MAY BE ENCOURAGED OR DISCOURAGED

Depending on the culture, a person might seek help only from those within their culture or family. Some might not ask for help even when they need it. They might be afraid of what others think or maybe they grew up thinking, "I can solve this by myself" and suffer in silence. Consider asking, "Who do you talk to when you just need to feel a little better?" Struggling in secret because of cultural "taboos" or stigma can keep a person at risk and be a barrier to a person's recovery. Seeking help is a sign that you want to learn, grow, and feel better.

TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS AND PROFESSIONALS MAY DIFFER

Racism, discrimination, and life experiences may affect how individuals seek help and who they seek it from. If you or someone you know has been unfairly treated by a professional or witnessed harm and wrongdoing because of race or other reasons, it is understandable to feel unsure about who you feel can be trusted. Asking, "Who is a trusted source of support for you?" can open a conversation about hope and connection.

> *Representation and building trust matter.*
>
> *It is extremely important to have someone talking to families who looks like them, speaks their language, and understands their culture- that's how they will feel comfortable and trust the person leading the conversation. You need to develop that trust for them to be comfortable expressing their pain. Many families keep suicide a secret and won't say why their loved one died, but talking about these issues and how they can be prevented is crucial. American culture is all about individuality, but suicide prevention involves coming together to support one another in a compassionate and nonjudgmental way.*

-Parent Aide Case Worker from Marin County

How Suicide Impacts Different Populations

While suicide affects everyone, certain populations face higher rates than other groups due to a combination of inequities in society, discrimination, and barriers to care. These disparities reflect systemic issues that harm our neighbors, family members, friends, and communities.

Collecting and understanding suicide data can help create new ideas and solutions that support our communities. However, there are limitations in data collection that can mask the reality of suicide's impact on different communities and the chance for more supportive and equitable mental health for everyone.

Let's learn more about how mental health and suicide affects specific populations.

SUICIDE DATA

There is not one event or factor that causes suicide. For additional data, visit the Marin County Suicide Prevention Data Dashboard.

45+

In Marin, adults older than 45 have some of the highest rates of suicide across all age groups.

4X

In Marin, veterans are at four times greater risk than non-veterans of dying by suicide.

3/4

In Marin, even though men make up half of the county's population, they represent three-quarters of all deaths by suicide.

144%

CDC data shows that nationally, suicides among Black youth are rising faster than any other racial/ethnic group and increased 144% between 2007-2020.

17% vs 2.4%

According to the Trevor Project, 17 percent of LGBTQIA+ adults attempt suicide during their lifetime compared to 2.4 percent of the general U.S. population.

MEN AND BOYS

Both nationally and in Marin County, men and boys are impacted by mental health and suicidality.

- In Marin, even though men make up half of the county's population, they represent three-quarters of all deaths by suicide.
- National trends show that suicide rates among men are four times higher than women.

FACTORS SHAPING SUICIDE RISK

CULTURAL AND SOCIAL NORMS

Cultural messages that emphasize ideas that men should be tough and strong can discourage them from seeking help or discussing mental health with friends, loved ones, or even their doctors. Because of these social expectations, men may often struggle in silence and may not receive the care they need.

MEN HAVE LOWER RATES OF HELP SEEKING

Mental health is treatable, but nearly 1 in 10 men experience some form of depression or anxiety and less than half seek treatment, even when treatment is accessible and can improve their well-being.

MEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO USE FATAL MEANS SUCH AS FIREARMS

While women also attempt suicide and do have higher emergency visit rates related to self-harm, men are more likely to die by firearm suicide. When comparing racial groups, white men have the highest firearm suicide rate.

MAJOR LIFE BURDENS

Economic stress, unemployment, divorce, and social isolation, particularly for middle-aged men and older, are also major factors.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO WARNING SIGNS IN MEN

Warning signs of distress among men may look different than other groups such as anger, irritability, substance use or misuse, and reckless behavior. Recognizing warning signs early can help men receive care faster.

SUPPORT HELP-SEEKING AND VULNERABILITY AMONG MEN AND BOYS

Encouraging men and boys to discuss their feelings before they build up can be a healthy coping strategy. Identifying other men who have also asked for help can show that healing is possible.

NORMALIZE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH AMONG MEN

You can help men and boys by creating conversations about mental health in the workplace, in social groups, on sports teams, at home, and especially in male-dominated spaces.

LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE

LGBTQIA+ people are impacted by suicide in significant ways.

- According to the 2021-2023 California Healthy Kids Survey data, about one-third of 9th graders and half of 11th graders in Marin who identify as LGBTQIA+ have considered suicide in the past 12 months.
- The Trevor Project indicates 17 percent of LGBTQIA+ adults attempt suicide during their lifetime compared to 2.4 percent of the general U.S. population.
- LGBTQIA+ young people are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers.

FACTORS SHAPING SUICIDE RISK

Stressors can impact a person's physical and mental health, their opportunities, access to support systems, healthcare, academic success, and even harm one's self-esteem and well-being. Stressors related to cultural factors that contribute to differences for LGBTQIA+ people can include:

DISCRIMINATION, REJECTION, AND STIGMA

Increased stress brought on by negative social experiences, such as rejection and stigma, from individuals, family members, coworkers/bosses, healthcare providers, peers, and even the government can contribute to a person's risk.

BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

LGBQIA+ people who experience bullying or harassment in person or online are at higher risk to attempt suicide. Anti-LGBTQIA+ messages shared in policies and laws can also add to feelings of stress and a lack of belonging and significantly impact their mental health.

REJECTION, FEELINGS OF SHAME AND LACK OF CONNECTION

LGBTQIA+ people may also internalize negative beliefs or messages from the community which can lead to problems with self-esteem and shame.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

BE A TRUSTED ADULT

Even one accepting adult in a child's life, whether at home, school, or elsewhere, can greatly reduce the chance of a suicide attempt. You can be the person to offer kindness, compassion, and acceptance which can go a long way in keeping LGBTQIA+ youth and adults safe and healthy.

EDUCATE YOURSELF ABOUT LGBTQIA+ IDENTITIES AND ISSUES

Have curiosity to build your understanding of your LGBTQIA+ friends and neighbors. What are different LGBTQIA+ orientations and gender identities? What do different pronouns mean? What is the history of LGBTQIA+ rights and movements?

SUPPORT LGBTQIA+ PEOPLE'S IDENTITIES

Whether at home, school, work, on social media or in community spaces, help create welcoming environments for LGBTQIA+ people by using people's correct pronouns, respectfully discussing and highlighting LGBTQIA+ rights and issues, and being kind.

SPREAD THE WORD

Share information with your friends and family about national organizations like the Trevor Project and local mental health campaigns in Marin like Break the Stigma.

Even small acts of kindness, like introducing your pronouns or using someone's chosen pronouns can help someone feel better. These simple acts create a safer, more supportive environment.

—QUEER YOUTH LEADER FROM MARIN COUNTY

OLDER ADULTS

Mental health and suicide risk among older adults (particularly 65+) remains a hidden issue that isn't often discussed.

- In Marin, adults older than 45 have some of the highest rates of suicide across all age groups.
- Nationally, older adults make up 16.8 percent of the population, but 22 percent of all suicides. Men ages 85 and older have the highest suicide rate of any group in the U.S.

FACTORS SHAPING SUICIDE RISK

SOCIAL ISOLATION AND LONELINESS

As people get older, they may become widowed or grieve the death of their loved ones and friends. Perhaps adult children or other family live far away. This can lead to fewer social connections and increased loneliness, sadness, and stress.

GENERATIONAL BELIEFS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Research shows that older adults may also be less likely to talk about mental health and seek help because of shame and stigma they may feel. Talking about mental health or even therapy was not commonplace in prior generations leaving many alone with their thoughts and pain.

FEELING LIKE A BURDEN WITH GROWING HEALTH ISSUES

Experiencing disability, sickness, chronic pain, declining physical health, and cognitive changes can worsen feelings of loneliness and even hopelessness.

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

An older adult living on a fixed income or is unable to work can make it difficult to ask for help, pay bills, obtain medication, and even afford healthcare.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

LEARN ABOUT SIGNS OF DEPRESSION IN OLDER ADULTS

Depression is not a normal part of aging. If you observe signs of depression among older adults such as sadness, irritability, anger, or even physical symptoms, take note and connect your loved one to a healthcare provider for an assessment.

MAINTAIN REGULAR CONTACT WITH OLDER LOVED ONES

Staying in contact or reaching out through phone calls, video chats, or visits can make all the difference for an older adult. Include older adults in family gatherings, social events, and activities to build more connection and support in their lives.

VOLUNTEER TO SUPPORT OLDER ADULTS

Check in with an aging neighbor or offer to help with errands or doctor's appointments. Consider volunteering in nursing homes, hospitals, and senior communities. Talking, playing games, going on a walk, or helping them with technology to access connections with family and loved ones are meaningful ways to make a difference in the life of an older person.

BLACK, INDIGENOUS, AND PEOPLE OF COLOR (BIPOC)

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color face rising suicide rates, particularly among youth. These racial, ethnic, and cultural groups are impacted by a history of discrimination and injustice that can negatively affect stress and mental health.

- In Marin, African American/Black and Hispanic residents and residents between the ages of 15-24 are overrepresented among those having an emergency department visit for injuries from self-harm.
- Nationally, suicide rates have increased by 144 percent among Black youth between 2007-2020.

FACTORS SHAPING SUICIDE RISK

RACISM, DISCRIMINATION AND BIAS

Assumptions about an individual or group based on stereotypes, daily and persistent negative interactions related to one's behavior or appearance, and exclusion from certain spaces and opportunities can have a harmful impact on an individual's safety, well-being, and quality of life.

BARRIERS TO CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE CARE

A lack of mental health providers who share the same cultural background or understand the unique experiences of different communities can lead to barriers in care and support that feels safe and respectful. Language differences and lack of access because of insurance or other factors can also make getting care more difficult.

HISTORICAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

For Indigenous, Black, and other marginalized groups, a long history of oppression, forced dislocation, and violence still affects families and communities today. These experiences can shape how people feel about or trust institutions and how they respond to stress.

IMMIGRATION STRESSORS (FOR SOME GROUPS)

For immigrant families, worries about deportation, family separation, or losing connection to their culture can increase stress and make it harder to reach out for help.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

LISTEN AND AMPLIFY BIPOC VOICES

Take time to listen to the experiences of BIPOC friends, coworkers, and neighbors without trying to explain or correct. Share and celebrate their work, stories, and perspectives so their voices reach wider audiences.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS COMMUNITIES

Get involved in neighborhood events, cultural celebrations, local BIPOC businesses, and coalitions that bring diverse groups together. Real connections help break down assumptions and strengthen understanding.

CHECK YOUR OWN BIASES

We all have biases. What matters is recognizing them. Notice how they might show up in your decisions, conversations, or assumptions, and make a point to keep learning and growing.

VETERANS

Veteran suicide is a serious problem that requires unique attention and prevention efforts.

- In Marin, veterans are at four times greater risk than non-veterans of dying by suicide.
- Nationally, the overall suicide rate among all veterans is 1.5 times higher than the general population. The highest rates of suicide are among older veterans ages 55-74.

FACTORS SHAPING SUICIDE RISK

MILITARY CULTURE

In the military, people are often taught to be "strong" and handle problems on their own. Showing vulnerable emotions can be seen as a weakness but this can make it harder for veterans to ask for help and find healthier ways to cope with mental or physical challenges.

DIFFICULTY TRANSITIONING BACK TO REGULAR LIFE

Veteran suicides often occur during the first year of transition to their non-military life. This can be due to a gap in care from military services and starting new services with the Veteran's Affairs or other community services. If access is limited to psychiatric services, for example, this can also lead to higher stress levels and ongoing trauma during this major life change.

A COMBINATION OF MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Some veterans may return home with a brain injury, grief from the deaths of colleagues, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other health issues that may increase suicidal risk. Veterans who experience a substance use disorder or who misuse drugs or alcohol are more than twice as likely to die by suicide than other veterans. Easy access to firearms can also lead to higher rates of attempts that may result in death.

STEPS YOU CAN TAKE

CONNECT WITH VETERANS

When veterans feel connected to community and have a network of friends they can turn to for support, they experience more positive mental health and well-being. Search for organizations that serve veterans and volunteer. Talk to your veteran friends, family members, or community members and check in on them. Create space for veterans to share their feelings without judgement.

SHARE THE 988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

This lifeline is available to veterans 24/7 (Call 988, press #1, chat, or text 838255) and provides support to veterans, service members, and their families. Responders on the line can help a veteran talk through difficult situations, connect them with health care professionals, and provide assistance and resources.

Allyship Saves Lives

Becoming an ally in suicide prevention is all about connecting across differences, listening to each other's stories, and understanding how culture and identity shape each person's path to health and safety. Equitable approaches that remove barriers to seeking help and expressing ourselves can create systems that work better for everyone. When the needs of the most vulnerable among us are met, we all benefit and get closer to a society where everyone can thrive.

Everyone can be an ally in suicide prevention. All that you need is curiosity and compassion to take action.

RESOURCES

CRISIS RESPONSE AND LIFELINES (24/7, CONFIDENTIAL)

Marin County Behavioral Health and Recovery Services Access Line: 888-815-1115

Marin County Crisis Stabilization Unit: 415-473-6666

Marin County Mobile Crisis Response Team: 415-473-6392

SAFE Team (San Rafael): 415-458-7233

SAFE Team (Novato): 415-899-7000

Responding to Our Own through Support (ROOTS, Marin City): 415-507-3543

National Alliance on Mental Illness Marin Helpline: 415-444-0480

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: Call/text/chat: 988

- Veterans: press 1 or text 838255
- In Spanish: Call 988, then press 2

TransLifeline: 877-565-8860

The Trevor Project Crisis Support: 1-866-488-7386 or text 'START' to 678-678 or chat online at thetrevorproject.org/get-help

YouthLine: Call 877-968-8491, text 'teen2teen' to 839863 or chat online at theyouthline.org

National Parent and Youth Helpline: Call or text 855-427-2736

Crisis Text Line: Text 'HOME' to 741-741

GRIEF SUPPORT

Buckelew Programs Survivors of Suicide Support Group
Email: SOSinfo@Buckelew.org

Felton Institute Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors (LOSS) Team and Support Groups: 415-726-4685 or email sbalestreri@felton.org

By the Bay: Grief and Counseling Support: 415-927-2273

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Marin County Suicide Prevention Collaborative: prevention.marinbhrs.org

Marin County Office of Education Health, Safety and Support: marinschools.org/programs-services/services/health-safety-support

Break the Stigma: Breakthestigma.net

The Culture and Suicide Prevention Institute: communityconnections.net/cspi

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention: afsp.org

National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: theactionalliance.org

MARIN COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
https://hhs.marincounty.gov

MARIN COUNTY DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND RECOVERY SERVICES
www.marinbhrs.org

MARIN COUNTY BHRS PREVENTION AND OUTREACH TEAM
www.prevention.marinbhrs.org or BHRSCommunity@MarinCounty.gov

MARIN HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
Health, Well-being & Safety

988
SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACT · PROPOSITION 63 · CALIFORNIA

BEHAVIORAL HEALTH AND RECOVERY SERVICES

WELLNESS · RECOVERY · RESILIENCE