

SPOTLIGHT ... on suicide prevention

By **LISA TALLYN**
Staff Writer

"Silence Hurts" was the key message the Halton Suicide Prevention Coalition (HSPC) wanted to get out at a recent session on suicide prevention at Georgetown Distinct High School.

The HSPC is attempting to raise awareness and break the silence around the issue to help reduce the stigma associated with suicide, prevent it, and get the word out that help is available in Halton.

At the session, that drew about 40 area residents, Alyssa Gremman, 22, of Oakville, hit home the importance of breaking the silence when she talked about her suicide attempt.

"I have contemplated suicide many times in my 22 years," said Gremman. "I can tell you 100 per cent I did not look suicidal when I was."

She said the first time she tried to kill herself she was happy go-lucky, with plenty of friends, good marks in school and a great family.

"I think that is part of what made it so hard for me to come out and talk about it," she said.

She had just started high school and now knows she was suffering from anxiety, but at the time, had no idea what was wrong.

She started feeling less confident, withdrawing, and at home was becoming very irritable and angry— fighting with her mother every day. But she said none of her friends knew there was anything wrong, because she continued to act normally in front of them.

"I hated myself, I hated the way I thought," she said.

She didn't feel she could talk to anyone and eventually she started harming herself.

"No one ever asked, or noticed," she said.

She said she became so unhappy that one time she "tried to self-harm myself

enough that I would pass away."

"It didn't work— all it did was terrify me," she said.

At that point she knew the only option was to tell someone, so she worked up the courage to talk to her mom.

"This was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," said Gremman.

She showed her mom some of the cuts she had inflicted upon herself. Her mother was horrified, and asked why.

Gremman had no good answer. "All I knew I didn't want to feel it anymore. I needed out."

"She said, 'It's okay. We're going to figure this out, it's okay.' Those words have stuck with me my entire life and are the reason I'm here," said Gremman, who still struggles with suicidal thoughts.

Gremman said because she "broke the silence" it made it possible for her to tell her mom anytime she's contemplating suicide.

HSPC member Erin Horlings of ADAPT said each year in Halton approximately 30 residents die by suicide, and about 420 people are hospitalized for attempting to kill themselves.

She said suicide is the second leading cause of death in Canadian children, youth and young adults.

Horlings added, more men have died by suicide in the past 10 years than in car crashes, and seniors over 60 are five times more likely to die by suicide than the rest of the population. Men over 80 have the highest suicide rate in Canada, she said.

She said suicide can be prevented by creating awareness, reducing the stigma around suicide and getting people who are contemplating suicide to seek help. She



said stigma is one of the key barriers for people from getting help.

"People might be more likely to reach out for help if we talk about it. It helps reduce the stigma," said Christina Jabalee of Support and Housing Halton and a member of HSPC.

"Stigma is the biggest barrier for youths for not accessing mental health services," said Horlings.

Jabalee, whose brother died by suicide five years ago, said he did bring up the subject to her a couple of times, but her instinct back then, before she had knowledge of suicide prevention, was to "change the subject."

The coalition encourages people considering suicide to talk to someone or call COAST (24-hr Crisis Outreach & Response Team) at 1-877-825-9011.

They outlined possible warning signs of people contemplating suicide including:

- statements about wanting to die
- repeated negative thoughts
- feelings of hopelessness
- change in behaviour, routines, mood, appearance, eating or sleeping
- inability to think about the future
- making final arrangements
- difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- sudden calmness or happiness
- increase in drug and alcohol use
- withdrawing from friends, family, activities
- anxiety or agitation, feeling trapped as if there's no way out
- hearing voices that talk about doing something dangerous
- rage, uncontrolled anger, seeking revenge
- no longer taking care of appearance



- persistently putting self down
- mentioning suicide or death in conversations

- previous suicide attempts

Horlings said the best prevention strategies "are ones that happen so early on."

She said people need to think about what brings joy to their lives.

"If we have all our eggs in one basket and these things fall apart we are all at risk for thoughts of suicide."

Jabalee said pets can be sources of joy for some.

After losing her brother she said "it was my dog that helped pull me out of that."

Horlings, who is allergic to animals, said baking gives her joy.

Halton Region Public Health Nurse Tanya Melykutty talked about 40 developmental assets for youth that could help them to be more likely to thrive than engage in risk behaviour.

The assets include family support, caring neighborhood, service to others, family and school boundaries, positive peer influence, creative activities, self esteem, responsibility, caring and reading.

For more information about the Halton Suicide Prevention Coalition visit www.suicidepreventionhalton.ca. For those struggling with depression or mental health issues call Halton Region to speak with a public health nurse at 311, or 905-825-6000 or visit www.halton.ca/mental-health.



Too Young To Die a three-part Metroland Media Group series can be found online at www.theifp.ca The series will run Thursday, Nov. 21 to Saturday, Nov. 23



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