

U Matter – Discussing the connection between alcohol use and suicide.

By Alex Potter, Development & Program Specialist at the Center for Health and Learning

Alcohol contributes to risks in our lives – car accidents, injuries, addiction and poisoning. Being under the influence lowers inhibitions, natural caution, and affects decision-making.

What may not be well known is the large role alcohol plays in suicide.

According to information provided during a recent presentation for the Injury Control Research Center for Suicide Prevention, Kenneth R. Connor, Psy.D., M.P.H., Associate Professor of Psychiatry for the University of Rochester Medical Center and the Director of VISN 2 Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention provided the following information; in 37% of deaths by suicide the person had been drinking right before they died; a quarter of deaths studied, blood alcohol level was higher than legal limit; and 40% of suicide attempts the person was drinking heavily directly before they tried to kill themselves.

New and ongoing research shows alcohol contributing to suicide risk in two ways: when people regularly abuse alcohol, and when people engage in “acute alcohol use” or intensive drinking in a short period of time.

People in the broad category of alcohol abuse, dependence, or addiction, are 2 to 2.5 times more likely to seriously think about killing themselves, and 2.5 to almost 4 times more likely to attempt suicide, than people who drink less or not at all. When someone who abuses alcohol attempts suicide, the risk for death resulting is 5 times higher than when alcohol is absent.

When “acute alcohol use” comes into play, numbers jump – 6 to 10-fold increase for making a suicide attempt, and six-fold increased risk of dying as a result.

These two risks create higher danger together than either alone. Someone who abuses alcohol is already at increased risk, and if that person engages in a night of heavy drinking their risk skyrockets.

Common responses to all these facts and figures are; “But that’s alcohol abuse. I drink, but, I don’t abuse. I’m certainly not an alcoholic.”

So let’s break down the words.

“Abusing alcohol” includes ‘heavy drinking’ – more than four drinks in a day for men, more than three for women. “Acute alcohol use” is more commonly known as ‘binge drinking’ – more than four drinks in approximately two hours for men, more than three for women.

Those situations may sound more familiar – for yourself, or for a loved one.

For instance, let's look at how our local 2013 High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union stacks up:

- Less than half of students believe binge drinking on weekends is harmful.
- One quarter of high school students binged in the last 30 days.
- Over half of those drinking in the last 30 days drank hard liquor.

Place that next to almost one third of high school students reporting feeling “sad or hopeless for more than two weeks in a row in the past year,” and 16% thinking seriously enough about suicide to make a plan. Consider that almost 80% of students think it is “easy” to get alcohol.

Alcohol alone does not cause suicide. Some of the strongest factors when matched with drinking are:

- Feeling isolated, “not belonging.”
- Depression.
- Negative interpersonal events – fighting with friends or partners, loss of loved one to death or break-up, loss of a job.

You do not have to be a ‘heavy’ drinker for alcohol to significantly alter your response to difficulties. Alcohol, especially bingeing while depressed, can bring someone who has not previously had suicidal thoughts to contemplating, even attempting, suicide.

Alcohol's affect on suicide holds across age. Adults can be as likely as teens to reach for a drink in hard times.

Unfortunately, alcohol is too-often used exactly during times when it can be most dangerous: after those bad break-ups, bad news, loss, when we're feeling our worst. The idea of “going out for a few drinks to take our mind off our troubles” is embedded in our society, despite being one of the worst responses.

Offering alcohol and encouraging partying when a friend loses a relationship or a job, or turning a blind eye to increased drinking because someone is “going through a rough time,” can be downright dangerous.

Reaching out with a shoulder and an ear is much more helpful, and safer, than pulling out a beer.

If you are feeling suicidal or are concerned about a loved one, please immediately call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or chat online at www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org. Anyone may contact the Lifeline at any time.

For more information about suicide prevention, what help is available, and what you can do to help, access www.U Matter U Can Get Help.com and www.U Matter U Can Help.com. The Umatter Suicide Prevention efforts are part of the programming of the Center for Health and Learning, a central resource on suicide prevention in Vermont.

For training information on suicide risk factors, warning signs, and prevention, please contact Nicole Miller, Program Specialist at CHL, at nicole@healthandlearning.org or visit www.healthandlearning.org. The 2014 Vermont Suicide Prevention Symposium organized and produced by CHL will be Wednesday, May 28, in Killington, VT. The general public is welcome and encouraged to attend this one-day interactive educational experience.

Alexander B. Potter is a Development & Program Specialist at the Center for Health and Learning. Alex conducts research, resource review and analysis, and reporting. He works with Nicole Miller on CHL's suicide prevention initiatives and has contributed the content for this column as a guest writer for the Brattleboro Area Prevention Coalition (BAPC); a local nonprofit that organizes community efforts to be involved in the ongoing prevention and reduction of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse in the Windham Southeast area. The coalition meets in Brattleboro on the second Friday of each month at 12pm; lunch is provided and all are welcome. Visit www.BrattleboroAreaPreventionCoalition.org or call 802.257.2175 to learn more about their prevention efforts and to get involved.