

Coming Together: A Community Response to Suicide

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The Acton and Boxborough communities, like many around the Commonwealth and country, have had the hard task of responding to the loss of youth by suicide. The World Health Organization has identified a community response to suicide as one of the most important factors contributing to prevention. What does a community response to suicide look like? Efforts are actively taking place in Acton, Boxborough, and many other communities around the Commonwealth, that promote healthy grieving, counter the stigma related to mental health challenges, provide the message that emotional crises can be overcome, and reinforce the idea that no one should struggle alone.

How do you support a community that is both grieving and working to prevent suicide? In Acton and Boxborough, we have been:

Coming Together. Community organizations, including the faith community, schools and town personnel, local mental health services, and youth programs have come together to create AB Cares, a community based collaborative that seeks to prevent suicide across the lifespan and support all who are impacted by suicide. AB Cares has been sponsoring community dialogs about mental health and wellness, among other programs.

Listening. Listening with empathy to the many community voices of concern who have ideas about what to do; to those who have questions about their own mental health challenges; and to those who are reminded of past pain from losing a loved one to suicide.

Talking. The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention's strategy for successful messaging recommends incorporating messages of hope and resilience in suicide prevention efforts. Effective prevention requires changing the narrative from one of hopelessness to one of hope and recovery. Programs we hosted, such as ***Don't Worry Alone - Sources of Hope***, used art and featured community members who shared their personal stories of hope and recovery from attempted suicide.

Training. AB Cares and Acton-Boxborough United Way have brought to the community suicide prevention trainings that are free and open to the public. These community trainings, entitled Question, Persuade and Refer (QPR), provide education about warning signs and how to refer a person in need to professional help. For sustainability, local leaders have been trained to lead such prevention programs going forward.

Educating. The public schools have introduced evidence-based curricula, including the Signs of Suicide (SOS) Program and screenings in middle and high school and have referred dozens of students who needed help to professional support. AB Cares has distributed hundreds of bright orange resource cards containing local and national resources on mental health and suicide prevention to students and people of all ages. Local High School students joined the effort by initiating and creating a smart phone app to provide resources for their peers. (See Illumination Mental Health (iOS / Android)).

We continue to learn, talk and work together as a neighborhood to help the community grieve and to support all residents who struggle so that we may move towards collaborative solutions.

On behalf of AB Cares,

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