Continuing the conversation

Krystle Wagner
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More than 40 community members participated in the second Town Hall meeting on suicide Monday night at the Grand Haven Community Center. They shared their personal experiences involving suicide and their ideas on how it can be addressed.

Serious, somber conversations swirled around the Grand Haven Community Center on Monday night.
A first Town Hall meeting on the topic took place Jan. 10.

Attendees said they hoped to learn tools for being effective and successful in speaking with someone who exhibits signs of suicide, how to create safe spaces from social media, and how to break the stigma around receiving help.

Extended Grace Board President Leijhi Koval said suicide impacts everyone, and she asked what can be done to help.

"We really need to look at it from a community aspect," she said.

Christy Buck, executive director of Mental Health Foundation of West Michigan, said the best time to talk to kids about suicide is when they ask questions or bring up the topic. She said children need to be given coping skills and told it's OK to report if they notice someone's behavior has changed.

Over the years, Buck said she’s had the conversation with her daughters and urged them to talk with her or someone else if they contemplate suicide.

Buck encouraged everyone to enter the National Suicide Hotline, 800-273-8255, into their phone "under a lifesaving tool."

In sharing experiences as caretakers and survivors, one woman said there was a recent suicide in her family. The woman said she is praying, attending grief counseling and encouraging family members to share their emotions as they travel along the "very difficult journey."

"It is a journey that begins the moment you hear what happened," she said.

Extended Grace Executive Director Barbara Lee VanHorssen said information shared during the meeting will be placed on her organization’s website.

The information will also be passed along to a task force, which formed in January 2016.

As a result of the task force, The Momentum Center, 715 Columbus Ave. in Grand Haven, was created as a place for "social integration" and for resources. VanHorssen said, Although the center
The Depression Bipolar Support Alliance is also working to create a drop-in center that will be a peer support resource.

Local schools have attempted to equip their staffs to deal with suicide by requiring Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) training.

Grand Haven elementary school students are being taught lessons on handling emotions through the Second Step program. Ninth-graders are being taught the Live, Laugh, Love curriculum, while sophomores through seniors are being taught mindfulness.

The Spring Lake school district is focusing on the "whole child," and on students' mental health as well as overall health.

Pine Rest has continued expressing an interest in providing psychiatry in the area, VanHorssen said.

In the justice system, first responder training is continuing, as is the county's prescription and opiate task force.