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## **Guest Opinion: How the U.S. Air Force fought suicide, and we can, too**

by Anat Admati

As a parent of three, including a Gunn student and a Terman student, I shared the sense of grief, concern and helplessness many adults and teens felt last spring when we were confronted with two tragic deaths, the first of several.

Seeking to understand better how to deal with this situation, I started educating myself on the subject. I soon realized that a lot is actually known and that there are things that can be done to prevent most such tragedies.

I and others became involved in various efforts, but I also came to realize that these efforts cannot fully succeed unless more people in the community become better aware of this information and thus empowered to act.

I am writing this to share some of what I learned and to call on everyone in this community, organizations and individuals, to respond to this challenge.

The main lesson I have learned is that we should not feel helpless, and that if we work together we can prevent tragedies and improve our community's well-being.

A lot of myth, stigma, fear and misunderstanding surround suicide. Many find it incomprehensible. Some believe no one can stop a person who plans to end his or her life.

In fact, while suicide is the result of complex biological, physical and circumstantial conditions, there is overwhelming evidence that most suicides can be prevented. And everyone, organizations as well as individuals, can do something to help in prevention efforts.

An inspiring example comes from the U.S. Air Force, which has proven that a comprehensive, community-based prevention effort can work and even bring other important benefits.

In the early 1990s, a staggering 24 percent of all deaths of airmen were due to suicides. Alarmed, in 1996 the Air Force embarked on a major prevention program that focused on enhancing social support and interconnectedness, developing individual coping skills and promoting cultural norms that encourage help-seeking behavior — emphasizing the true courage it takes to ask for help when one needs it. Airmen were told it is honorable to seek early help for mental and emotional difficulties, and not honorable to try to cover them up.

The result of this program, which has been scientifically evaluated, was dramatic: a sustained one-third reduction in such deaths, dropping the rate substantially below the national average in the general population.

In addition, there was a significant reduction in the number of homicides and cases of family violence, and even in accidental deaths. By now all branches of the military have created similar programs.

Suicide is a major cause of death beyond the military, and many families and communities experience the pain that comes with it. An average of 90 people die by suicide every day in the United States, twice the number of deaths from HIV/AIDS and nearly twice the number of homicide deaths. Suicide is the third highest cause of death of youth aged 15 to 24 and the second highest cause of death of college-age young people. It is also

estimated that there are 750,000 attempts a year that require medical intervention.

Suicide prevention is everyone's business.

Since the vast majority of victims have a diagnosable and treatable mental illness, suicide will be reduced if these illnesses are more effectively diagnosed and treated, as many have noted. For this to happen, those who need help must be identified and assisted with getting appropriate help.

There is also strong evidence that restricting access to means of self-harm, such as building suicide barriers on bridges, can make a significant difference. A classic example is that almost all who were thwarted from or survived leaping off the Golden Gate Bridge did not attempt suicide subsequently. The recent approval by the Golden Gate Bridge Authority to build a suicide barrier is therefore a welcome step.

Organizations such as the city and school district have important roles to play. Project Safety Net, initiated by the city, has brought many organizations together to focus on prevention efforts that emphasize improved access to mental health resources and an overall raising of awareness that can replace hopelessness with hope.

A number of useful actions and plans have been put into place by students, parents, teachers, administrators and community members. But we can do more if all of us gain a better understanding of all that would be useful — and act without delay.

For example, as in the Air Force, and analogous to required training sessions on sexual harassment in the workplace for managers and employees, teachers and others should undergo regular training on mental health and suicide prevention.

School assemblies and other opportunities should be used to de-stigmatize mental illness and encourage help-seeking behavior.

Prevention efforts should not be left just to organizations. There is much that every individual can do.

Kevin Hines, who survived a jump off the Golden Gate Bridge in 2000, said he would likely not have leaped if someone on the bus or walking along the bridge had noticed his distress and asked how he was doing.

We can all start looking out more for those around us and become more connected and more caring. We can all help in addressing youth stress and bullying, and promoting help-seeking behavior.

Young persons should understand that if someone's life might be in danger being a good friend means making sure they get professional help, even if it means betraying "a secret." Adults can contribute to efforts to restrict access to means of self-harm (check the Safety Net website: [www.cityofpaloalto.org/safetynet](http://www.cityofpaloalto.org/safetynet).)

Some would argue that the success of the Air Force cannot be replicated in civilian communities. While the Air Force is more hierarchical and structured than a diverse town such as Palo Alto, it in fact has faced more obstacles in prevention than we do: Its forces are scattered, its population keeps changing and its traditional culture has frowned upon seeking help for mental conditions. Airmen also have more access to lethal means of self harm. We can and should do as well or better than the Air Force to prevent suicides.

Our community can grow from this traumatic year. If we all, leaders, organizations and individuals, do our parts in this effort we will not only prevent suicides but we will emerge a healthier and happier community.