

It was 2015 and Christmas was fast approaching that year with its usual festivities and endless concerts/parties to attend. On top of that, my father-in-law, Dave, was also in the middle of moving his dental practice across town and all the details of that decision began to weigh heavily on him as the holiday season approached. There seemed to be a never-ending list of to-do's between making sure the new office was up to par with regulations and finding ways to condense years of paper patient files that filled storage. The money involved was daunting, but Dave's greatest fear was that patients might not follow him to his new office and then all of the risks taken for his business move would result in financial ruin.

Even as family members and friends rallied around him to offer encouragement and confidence in his ability to continue a successful dental practice, nothing seemed to convince him. We believed everything would work out, but something deep inside was holding him back from accepting that belief. After years of battling depression in silence, December 22, 2015 was the day he decided to end his life. It was only a few days prior that a date for counseling had been scheduled for the soonest appointment available on January 2nd, but unfortunately, it was a week and four days too late.

Sadly, stories like Dave's and Anthony's are all too common among countless individuals dealing with mental health issues. The care that is needed most urgently seems just out of reach due to a variety of reasons, but this doesn't mean that that can't change. With the passing of the Mental Health Reform Act in 2016, more awareness is being brought on a congressional level about the impacts that suicide is having on society as a whole. But this is only the beginning. If rates of suicide are going to substantially decline through these reforms, it all starts with education about awareness and prevention.

In more recent years, topics of depression, anxiety, and suicide have been discussed in open and honest conversations. The death of Robin Williams sparked interest in the media to be more mindful of those around you who may be suffering in silence and how to talk about these issues. Learning to be the voice for those in pain by offering to sincerely listen and really ask “how are you?” creates a safe place for someone to come to when they are in need. Too often we avoid opportunities for these vital conversations to take place because we don’t know how to. However, with the passing and enacting of legislative policies requiring mental health first aid training, everyone will be better equipped to respond to these situations.

Improved legislation requiring mental health first aid training goes beyond healthcare professions, but in schools, and all other workplaces as well. In the medical field, less complicated methods for obtaining referrals to mental health specialists need to be changed, along with more strategic discharge policies from hospitals. By allowing funding for research projects in topics such as mental health and suicide, we will gain further insight into how to develop improved treatment options. Training clinicians with these evidence-based treatment practices will change the way that individuals are currently experiencing care for the better. Extending these trainings to bring awareness to children and teens can create marked declines in rates of suicide among young adults. The ability to successfully recognize when there’s someone in crisis can make all the difference in saving that person’s life.

By uniting as a nation to implement much needed legislation regarding treatment, trainings, and access to care, we will be doing our part to ensure that individuals like Anthony and my father-in-law Dave, receive the vital help they need.