Celebrity suicides may lead to copycats

By Ben Steelman StarNews Staff
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Area professors and counselors offer advice to friends and loved ones as suicide rates rise.

After the suicides of designer Kate Spade and celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain, health care professionals are worried about a “contagion effect.”

In 1962, the U.S. suicide rate jumped 12 percent after news coverage of the death of Marilyn Monroe. It jumped nearly 10 percent in 2014 after the suicide of Robin Williams.

“The news can have a huge impact,” said Kate Brody Nooner, an associate professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

Nationally, suicide rates have risen more than 30 percent since 1999, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Men remain three times more likely to commit suicide than women, but the U.S. suicide rate among women and girls has climbed by 50 percent for women and girls, the CDC reported this month.

Substance abuse problems are a major factor in growing rates, Nooner said.

Nationally, the suicide rate hovers around 13.5 cases per year per 100,000 population. New Hanover County’s rate is slightly lower: 13.01 per 100,000, about the North Carolina state average. Suicide rates are slightly higher in the rest of the region, though -- 14.01 per 100,000 in Brunswick County and 15.35 per 100,000 in Pender, according to CDC
figures.

Whites are far more likely to attempt suicide than African Americans or Hispanics, according to the N.C. Division of Public Health. Generally, the suicide rate peaks between the ages of 45 and 54, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, although in North Carolina, suicides among women were highest between 55 and 64.

In North Carolina, firearms were the method of death in 56 percent of suicides, followed by hanging (22 percent) and poisoning (18 percent).

“For the people who are left, there's never an answer,” said Susan J. Sabatini, a licensed family therapist in Wilmington with a focus on grief counseling. “I could have done this, I should have done that.”

Friends and family of a suicide will pass through stages of grief, loss, anger, guilt and shame, Sabatini said. “Suicide carries a stigma,” she said. “People kind of whisper.”

In fact, according to experts, a majority of suicides show no signs of mental illness before they act.

Nevertheless, friends and loved ones should be alert to possible warning signs, Sabatini and Nooner said. Among these are withdrawal or isolation, a loss of interest in things that were once an individual's passion, sleeping too much, or not sleeping at all.

Individuals may drop cues such as “I feel like I'm a burden,” or “Things would be better if I'm not around.”

Often there’s an aura of hopelessness.

“I tell people, if you’ve never been diagnosed with depression, you can't understand it,” Sabatini said. “I tell them it's like being in a room with no windows and no doors. There's no way out.”

“Take these signs seriously,” Nooner said. “Don’t brush it off. Urge people to see a therapist.”
“Be direct,” Sabatini said. “Ask them, ‘Are you thinking about hurting yourself?’ People will be dancing around it. Don’t let them. Don’t tell them what to do. Ask them what they want done.

“Just listen,” she added. Affirm their feelings. Don’t try to ‘fix’ things. Don’t tell them they’ll get over it -- that’s dismissing their feelings. But get them to a therapist.”

A number of phone services are available to help including the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 800-273-8255 and the Coastal Horizons Center Crisis Hotline at 910-392-7408 or 800-672-2903.

Family members should also reduce the individual’s access to lethal weapons, Nooner said, such as guns, medications, razors or knives.

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