

Forum

Teen suicide: Sharing our pain



Commentary

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USA TODAY NETWORK – TENN.

When I was 10 years old, my family divorced, and we went through a long and painful custody battle.

Within a few years, my childhood home burned down, we moved from a suburb in Alabama to a blue-collar neighborhood in New Jersey, my 14-year-old sister ran away from home, and my stepfather was arrested and went to jail (though the charges were later dismissed and expunged).

I was skinny and I was bad at sports, and I never knew the right things to say. And I was bullied — though not as bad as others. I was lonely and depressed and full of anxiety. There were times when I didn't have friends.

I'm telling you this because I think it's time we started talking more openly about our pain, especially our childhood pain, and particularly about what we did to get through it.

There's been a lot of focus lately on teen suicide in Clarksville after two middle school age girls killed themselves in two days. Everyone's looking for the reasons why and what we as a

community can do about it.

Joey Smith, the Montgomery County Health Department director, has given us a place to start. It's called ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences — problems we go through as children that can pile up and lead to depression, and in some cases suicide. The more ACEs you have, the more at risk for teen depression you might be, and, most importantly, the more support you might need from others.

In my case, I had a few ACEs: divorce and several doses of emotional trauma.

But when I look back on what helped me work through those ACEs, I see that I did have family support. My mom in particular was very open with me. I was also heavily involved in a church youth group, which at first my parents forced me to attend. And I had teachers who didn't give up on me, even when I was acting like a jerk.

What might have happened without that support? I don't know.

Two of my best friends have committed suicide. One when we were in college, and another seven years ago. Would more support have made a difference? Maybe. I'd like to think so. In both cases, everyone was shocked. They hadn't been open about their depression, at least not in a way that anyone

picked up on until afterward.

That's part of the problem. When it comes to suicide, everything happens in 20/20 hindsight.

While there's no way to know what might have prevented the two deaths here in Clarksville, it's important for us to learn from them. And we can't just react with silver bullet solutions.

Yes, bullying is a problem, but when hasn't bullying been a problem?

Yes, social media makes things worse, but social media can also provide emotional support for isolated teens.

We also need to address the lack of mental health care available to teens. In one of the suicides, the family had tried to get the teen into counseling, but they were turned away. They made too much money to be on TennCare but not enough to be able to afford private insurance. I know the expansion of Medicaid is politically controversial, but I'm not sure politics matter when kids are dying who could have been helped with proper mental health care.

Our institutions are working on solutions:

The City of Clarksville is part of a group called SLIC (Saving Lives In Clarksville) that is targeting suicide among veterans and their family members. The lessons they learn during that

process might make a difference for all of us.

The Clarksville-Montgomery County School System has a fairly new program on social-emotional learning, designed to help kids with coping skills.

So what can we do, as parents, neighbors, potential mentors? One thing that will help is to reach out to the teens in your life. Talk to them about your own ACEs — what you went through as a kid. It's not always easy to be vulnerable around a teenager, but it's important.

And share what helped you through it. Maybe it was music, or the church, or sports, or a grown-up who would listen. A grown-up like you.

Maybe sharing our pain, and talking openly about how rough things can be, is a step toward healing, and a step toward hope.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. Or text "TN" to 741741 to reach the Suicide Prevention Text Line.

Reach Leaf-Chronicle Editor Chris Smith at chrissmith@theleafchronicle.com, 931-245-0282 or on Twitter @cssmithwrites. To support his work, consider signing up for a digital subscription at TheLeafChronicle.com.

TODAY IN HISTORY

Today is Wednesday, April 24, the 114th day of 2019.

1800: Congress approved a bill establishing the Library of Congress.

1932: In the Free State of Prussia, the Nazi Party gained a plurality of seats in elections.

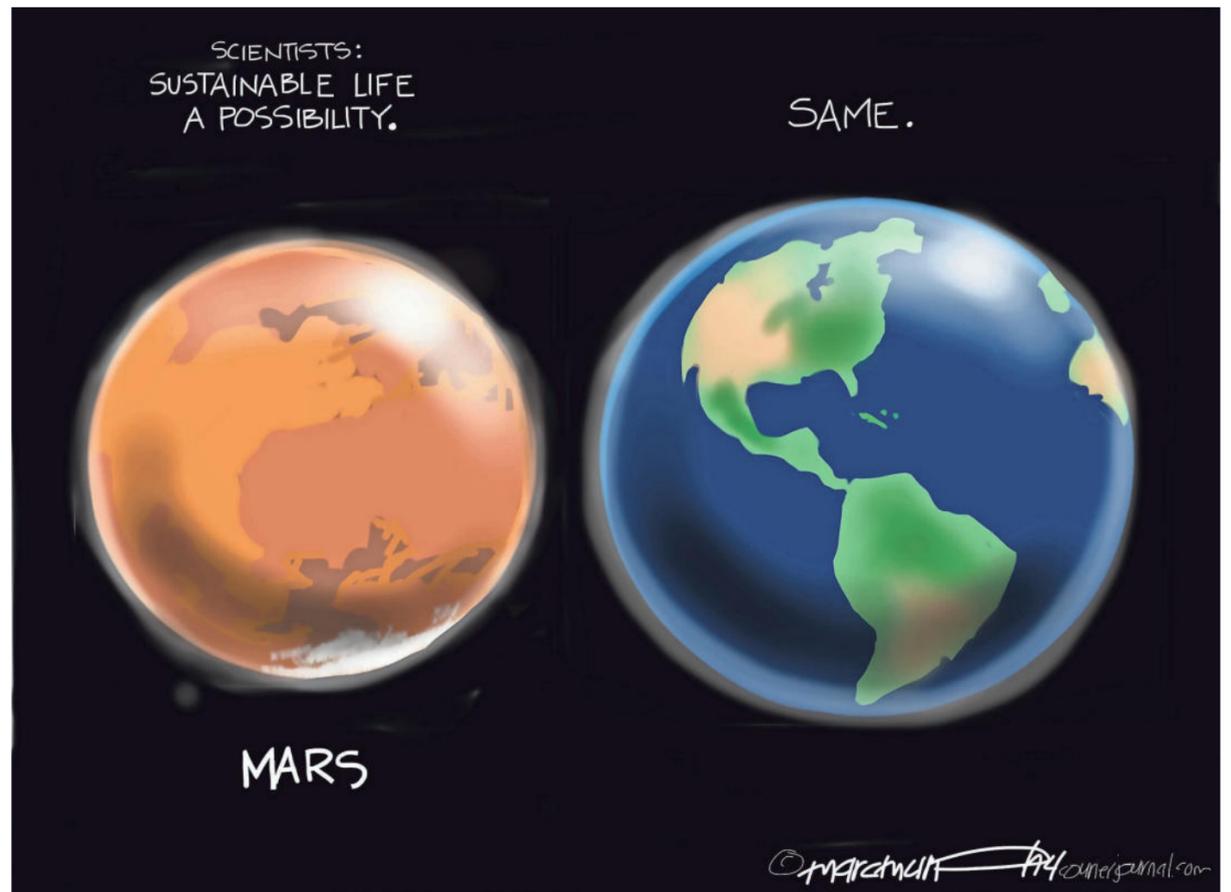
1970: The People's Republic of China launched its first satellite, which kept transmitting a song, "The East Is Red."

1980: The United States launched an unsuccessful attempt to free the American hostages in Iran, a mission that resulted in the deaths of eight U.S. servicemen.

1990: The space shuttle Discovery blasted off from Cape Canaveral, Florida, carrying the \$1.5 billion Hubble Space Telescope.

1995: The final bomb linked to the Unabomber exploded inside the Sacramento, California, offices of a lobbying group for the wood products industry, killing chief lobbyist Gilbert B. Murray. (Theodore Kaczynski was later sentenced to four lifetimes in prison for a series of bombings that killed three men and injured 29 others.)

2003: U.S. forces in Iraq took custody of Tariq Aziz, the former Iraqi deputy prime minister.



Tenn. leads in fight against misleading ads



Your Turn

Richard Briggs
Guest columnist

The health of many Tennesseans is being put at risk by misleading television advertisements regarding so-called "dangerous" medicines or medical devices.

Physicians are concerned about these ads and want legislators to take action to protect patients.

With enactment of a new law passed by the General Assembly, Tennessee is at the forefront nationwide in requiring truth in advertising to guarantee the health and safety of our citizens.

Anyone who watches television, listens to the radio or uses social media

has seen "bad drug" ads. Unlike commercials for pharmaceuticals, these spots are only lightly regulated and frequently contain disingenuous or inaccurate information.

They work well — too well. Many people become worried about the medications they are taking and give them up without consulting their doctors. That can be a tragic mistake. It can lead to a recurrence of symptoms or the emergence of new ones. Patients may end up back in their doctor's office or in the emergency room.

The problem is getting worse. Drug-injury lawsuit advertisements have increased by 60% in the past 10 years, with law firms and aggregators annually spending roughly \$150 million on them. It has become a big business that has a negative impact on far too many people

dealing with serious medical conditions.

One 2018 study of 500 medical providers and 800 patients found that one-fourth of patients who saw attorney advertising for their medication stopped taking it. As a physician, this concerns me, and I am proud that the General Assembly took decisive action before more Tennesseans were put in jeopardy.

I was proud to sponsor SB352 in the Senate to require truth in advertising and patient protections in Tennessee. The law requires advertisers to warn patients that stopping any prescribed medication regimen without their doctor's consent is dangerous.

It stops the mislabeling of ads as public service announcements or the use of inaccurate language such as "recall," "medical alert," or "health alert."

Finally, the law tightens regulations to ensure patients are not led to believe the ads are affiliated with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration or other government agencies, and that any personal medical information they do give to advertisers is not misused.

I am grateful that my fellow legislators at the General Assembly passed these protections with overwhelming support for the health and welfare of the citizens of Tennessee. Yet again, Tennessee is leading the nation, this time in the fight to protect patient health.

Sen. Richard Briggs practices cardiothoracic surgery in Knoxville, is past president of the Knoxville Academy of Medicine and sits on the Board of Trustees of the Tennessee Medical Association. He represents the 7th state Senate district in Knox County.

THOUGHT OF THE DAY

"The door to the past is a strange door. It swings open and things pass through it, but they pass in one direction only. No man can return across that threshold, though he can look down still and see the green light waver in the water weeds." — Loren Eiseley, American anthropologist (1907-1977).

Letters to the editor

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