

## **Troubled in paradise**

Aspen: This remote Rocky Mountain sanctuary often transforms into a gilded prison for its residents. Often enough that the suicide rate in Aspen and Pitkin County triples the national average. Often enough that it is twice the rate in Colorado, where a higher percentage of people die by their own hand than in all but five other states.

And often enough that a team from the University of Colorado's Depression Center is here trying to curb our disproportionate number of suicides, educate the local community about how to help friends and neighbors who may be headed for mental health crises, and maybe change the way we medically treat the mentally ill or depressed here.

### **How to save a life**

A crowd of concerned locals packed the ballroom at the Hotel Jerome on Friday morning for an interactive conference on suicide and local mental health issues, led by the Depression Center. The morning-long session spawned out of a partnership between the Denver-based organization and the Aspen Valley Medical Foundation to conduct "needs assessment" research for how the Roaring Fork Valley can prevent suicide.

They hope later this year to bring new suicide-specific resources to the valley. At Friday's session, psychiatrists from the center used the local crowd as a sounding board on what we need to quell Aspen's suicide predicament.

The prevailing answer thus far is not more doctors or new public safety agencies. Instead, experts and the public mostly agreed that ordinary Aspen citizens, not professional specialists, must assist one another to stay mentally healthy.

"Most people who are suicidal do not walk into a psychiatrist's office and say, 'Hey, doc, I've been thinking about killing myself,'" Dr. Michael Allen, director of research at the Depression Center, told the crowd at the Jerome. "If we are going to help you with the suicide problem up here it's going to be about you helping each other."

Dr. Allen also did a training class with local first responders in March. It focused on how emergency workers can recognize warning signs for suicide among their own ranks.

In an informal survey at the Jerome event, citizens voted in favor of establishing suicide prevention training programs for locals over five other options, such as setting up more treatment services. The choice receiving the lowest number of votes was to designate a local suicide prevention coordinator.

The biggest barrier to people seeking help or talking to friends about depression, experts say, is the negative stigma attached to suicidal tendencies and seeking mental health treatment. But Dr. Allen said that 15 percent of all diseases diagnosed in America are mental, which accounts for more than cancer. And more people die in suicides, he said, than by murder, terrorist attack or lightning strike.

So it is pretty likely that you know someone who is at risk.

## **Why we kill ourselves here**

Ironically, small resort communities have elevated levels of suicide, experts believe, in part because of their perceived perfection as escape destinations.

Dr. Vince Savage, who runs Valley Information and Assistance, calls it an “end of the road” syndrome. Savage said people who leave an everyday life elsewhere for a utopian Aspen existence set themselves up for an inevitable letdown.

If people find they aren’t happy here, he said, they often believe they do not think they can be happy anywhere. With nowhere better or more beautiful to go from Aspen, some people choose to die instead.

“I believe people can only be disappointed as far as their expectations here,” Dr. Savage said of the local transplant populace.

Savage joked that when people tell him they are moving here, he often tells them, “I hope you’ve brushed up on your narcissism.”

Aspen’s societal focus on physical exercise and skin-deep beauty is another contributing factor, he believes. While people develop their bodies into peak physical shape hiking up the Ute Trail or seek an extreme rush hucking the cliffs at the Hanging Valley Wall, they can let their mental and emotional stability slide. (In addition to having its highest suicide rate, Pitkin County has the lowest rate of obesity in Colorado — which in turn has the lowest obesity rate in the country.)

The Aspen party scene compounds mental health problems for locals, experts agree. Most suicides are believed to relate to substance abuse, particularly alcohol. Dr. Allen described the way overusing alcohol and drugs “hijacks” the pleasure centers of the brain and can lead to depression.

While suicide is a problem that transcends social class and income, some at the conference suggested Aspen’s overabundance of hard-working and hard-partying service industry folk may be at a greater risk of developing substance abuse and mental health problems. Those people get stressed out because they have to work a ton to afford living here, it was suggested, and are at risk of developing dangerous after-hours habits.

“The nature of a resort is that you are working in recreation and part of recreation is alcohol,” said David Crutchfield, of The Right Door, a nonprofit that coordinates treatment for substance abusers. Crutchfield said his organization is on track to treat about 1,200 different people with drug and alcohol problems in 2009 — the most in its six-year history.

And although the days are long gone when it was considered socially acceptable to use cocaine openly in local bars, many at Friday’s conference said they thought that abusing drugs and alcohol is still widely approved of here. Lori Kret, a county case worker, said she thought Aspen self-defeatingly views drinking and drugging as “a fun-filled glamorous experience.”

“People come here to party and they don’t realize that addiction is a disease and it tears families and communities apart,” Kret said.

## Local resources

In addition to a slew of private practice psychiatrists who operate in the valley, The Right Door, Valley Information and Assistance as well as the Aspen Counseling Center offer free help to those who need it. The Aspen Counseling Center additionally runs a 24-hour mental health crisis hotline.

A new Web site, [www.rfmentalhealth.org](http://www.rfmentalhealth.org) , provides a searchable database of mental health providers and other resources from Aspen to Rifle.

## What to look for

Some common warning signs for suicide, according to the National Mental Health Information Center:

- Threatening to hurt or kill oneself or talking about wanting to hurt or kill oneself
- Looking for ways to kill oneself by seeking access to firearms, pills, or other means
- Talking or writing about death, dying or suicide when these actions are out of the ordinary for the person
- Feeling hopeless
- Feeling rage or uncontrolled anger or seeking revenge
- Acting reckless or engaging in risky activities — seemingly without thinking
- Feeling trapped, like there's no way out
- Increasing alcohol or drug use
- Withdrawing from friends, family and society
- Feeling anxious, agitated or unable to sleep; or sleeping all the time
- Experiencing dramatic mood changes
- Seeing no reason for living or having no sense of purpose in life

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The Hotel Jerome ballroom was packed on Friday with concerned locals interested in learning more about suicide and depression. Assistance and counseling help is available in the valley. The Web site [www.rfmentalhealth.org](http://www.rfmentalhealth.org) provides a searchable database of mental health providers and other resources from Aspen to Rifle.