

JFS Has New Focus on Destigmatizing Conversations About Suicide

Danny Schwartz :



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On the heels of the Annual Virtual Conference on Suicide, many people and organizations in the Metro Detroit Jewish community opened up about the work being done in the suicide prevention and awareness space and how important these conversations are in combating the stigma.

Kevin's Song, a Michigan-based charitable organization dedicated to generating public awareness about the causes of suicide, held its Annual Virtual Conference on Suicide in late January.

The conference featured survivors of suicide who shared their stories of combating stigma and dealing with loss and grief, followed by a panel discussion with four survivors who shared their personal experiences of surviving the pain of suicide loss.

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Reaching for Hope

Rabbi Daniel Syme, rabbi emeritus at Temple Beth El, has dedicated his life to youth suicide prevention since 1975 when his 21-year-old brother, Michael, took his own life.



Rabbi Daniel Syme

Syme started a national suicide prevention program, Reach for Hope, and has been dedicated to saving lives across the nation ever since. “Every time I was able to save a life, it was as if I had saved Michael,” Syme said.

Syme also works in suicide prevention with Jewish Family Service. He said, until recently, discussions about suicide simply didn’t take place.

“When these discussions started taking place, people heard about them, and people who had been very reluctant to talk about their own experiences came out of the woodwork and shared their pain and determination to get involved,” Syme said. “If I’ve learned one thing in close to 50 years, it’s that talking about suicide helps to prevent it.”



Julia Cohen

JFS Youth Mental Health Coordinator Julia Cohen says community events and programs where we normalize and talk about mental health are critical.

“I think reducing stigma is key. Once people feel supported and comfortable to raise their hand and say they’re struggling and need help, I think that, in and of itself, makes huge bounds in suicide prevention,” she said.

'We Need to Talk'

We Need to Talk, a youth mental health program developed by the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Detroit and its partners in 2017, was created in response to a community needs assessment that revealed a significant number of youth were struggling with sadness, anxiety and depression.

Four years after its creation, the day-to-day operations of the program have moved to JFS, and Cohen says the program has seen significant progress in addressing its three programmatic pillars: awareness, knowledge and skills, and access.

"Since its inception, nearly 1,000 community professionals have been trained in mental health and suicide alertness trainings," she said.

JFS recently hired a suicide prevention coordinator, Mayim Meyers, who will specifically focus on suicide prevention in the Metro Detroit Jewish community.

Cohen says in the next couple months, she and Meyers will be trained in ASIST, a two-day, intensive suicide prevention training, to help their efforts.

Meyers started in January and said she has many hopes for the role.



Mayim Meyers

"My hope is to be one of the point people in the community to help support those who are in an acute crisis," she said. "And I want to help the various organizations throughout Detroit know where to go and what to do if someone does report ideation, if it feels like a family member is in crisis. Or, if something does happen, how they can support the people who have lost a friend or family member."

Meyers said that she believes a person whose job is solely based on suicide prevention is a step forward.

"It throws the word into everyday dialogue, which helps to destigmatize it," she said. "It also makes it approachable to people who may not be going through a difficult time themselves, but they know someone who is and they want to be a support for those people. They know where to turn."

Especially with how tough the past two years have been with the pandemic, Meyers' advice to anyone struggling is to simply reach out to someone, whether it be through the many resources at JFS, another community organization or their rabbi.

"Get that conversation started," she said. "There are resources available, and you're not alone."

If you or someone you know are in crisis, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or text the Crisis Text Line (text HELLO to 741741). For the many services JFS offers, visit jfsdetroit.org/find-help/mental-health-and-wellness/ or call (248) 592-2313.