

SAFE TALK: Changing the Conversation around Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

By *Tricia Baker*



Much time has passed since the deaths of Chris Cornell of Sound Garden and Linkin Park's front man Chester Bennington. I believe adults are not fully realizing the true impact that the deaths of these youth heroes has had on our youth. Their deaths have rocked their worlds, especially those who struggle with depression and other mental health disorders.

This country is facing a youth suicide crisis. For the first time, parents are thinking, "Yes, it could be my child." People are trying to understand why there is a tragic increase in youth suicides. In New Jersey alone, we had 7 youth suicides in Mercer County in a 20 month period. In October alone, there were three youth suicides in West Windsor. Youth deaths by drug overdose is also scarily on the rise. Youth with untreated mental health disorders are three to four times more likely to self medicate with drugs and alcohol.



The lyrics of Sound Garden and Linkin Park spoke to so many youth. *FELL ON BLACK DAYS* was written by Chris Cornell as a teenager struggling with bouts of depression. Linkin Park's *IN THE END* motivates youth "to recover from bad times". Music from both bands inspired youth to fight their mental health battles. Chris Cornell and Chester Bennington were mental health warriors. If they could struggle through their dark days and come out ok, so could youth. When these heroes died, the hope of recovery was lost.



Do not say "REST IN PEACE" – Immediately after his death, thousands of RIP's filled Chester's Twitter feed. It started to occur to me that that this is a very common thing to say in memory of a loved one lost, "RIP", "Rest In Peace", "They are out of pain and at peace". It is important to understand that suicide is not about ending life. It is about ending pain. While we are heartbroken by the loss of these beloved heroes, should we be saying "rest in peace"? We want our youth to **LIVE IN PEACE**. Many of Chris' and Chester's greatest fans fight their brains every day to stay alive. They live with the emotional, mental and physical pain of depression and other mental health disorders and want nothing more than peace. I no longer say those words about peace. I talk about how much the person will be missed, how much my heart is broken. I want young people to know that they will be tremendously missed should they be considering ending their lives. In my heart I know that our heroes are at peace; it does not need to be said. For the protection of all of those who are struggling.

No one "commits cancer" – As mental health advocates, we no longer say the words "committed suicide". People make a choice to commit crimes and commit sins. Suicide is a symptom of an illness. It is a decision made with an unhealthy brain and distorted thinking, so it truly is not a choice.

Healthy Student Talk – When presenting to youth, we encourage young people to be aware of their choice of words. Too often they throw around words of suicide. “I got a B on my test. I am going to kill myself.” When everyone is saying it, it dilutes the message when someone who is struggling and finally gets up the courage to ask for help. Their words are ignored because “everyone says it”.

Suicide is NOT a Joke – I can’t tell you how many times I see jokes about suicide in sit-coms and movies. As a mom who has lost a child to suicide, I feel there is NOTHING funny about suicide. We need to stop this casual practice of joking about mental health disorders and those who die by suicide.

Responsible Talk on Suicide – Also critical is that the media, and members of society, MUST talk responsibly on the deaths of celebrity heroes. If any celebrity died from a heart attack or cancer, their death would not be described in every detail in the media. The details of their autopsy reports are not “news” and not shared publicly with people around the world. Not only are we telling fans to find peace in death; we are telling them exactly how they can end their lives.

I remember listening to the death report, and conversations, of Robin Williams. My heart broke as the news reporter went on about every single detail of Robin’s plan to end his life. I want to remember Robin Williams for all of the joy he brought into my family’s lives; NOT the details on how he died. This is not my business, nor is it the business of anyone except for those closest to him. A good friend shared recently that her son, who was a huge Robin Williams fan, ended his own life only weeks after Robin’s passing. Responsible reporting will decrease suicide contagion.



Our family is not celebrity, but after our son, Kenny, died the local papers were contacting our neighbors for the “dirty secret” in the family. There was no secret: Only that our son struggled with a severe genetic mental health disorder, and as hard as our family tried, we were not able to get him the help to save his life.

Not only did we have to live with the heartbreak and death of our precious child, but we also had to deal with press and the electronic comments that were horrific, mean and disgusting. People have no idea what happened in our family. They have no idea how hard Kenny and our family worked to get him help. They have no right to judge us as a family. Suicide or overdose are the only forms of death where you lose a loved one and are judged, criticized and sometimes ostracized.

Be KIND. Always. – As a society, we are moving away from being kind to each other. How quickly do our students say or type to each other, “Go kill yourself”? Think about what you say before you say it. Today, it is so simple to type something cruel and hit send electronically. We don’t see the pain that we inflict on the other side of the internet. We need to understand that we are all different, and should accept each other for these differences and BE KIND. ALWAYS.

I believe that we can all take positive action. Adults need to let our children know that research for mental health recovery continues to make progress every day. Young people know that if they continue to fight, and hang on long enough, there is always hope for healing.

Tricia Baker, YMHA, CPDT-KA, Co-founder Attitudes In Reverse, Program Director AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds *After a 20 year corporate career in marketing, Tricia Baker experienced the tremendous loss of her son, Kenny, recognized the need for educating our nation’s youth about good mental health, and with her family, started Attitudes In Reverse® or AIR™. AIR includes the AIR Dogs: Paws for Minds™ program, which certifies handlers and dogs to work with youth and certifies emotional support animals for people who live with disabilities. AIR is a member of the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies.*