Holiday Blues: Debunking the Suicide Myth

By Lila Abassi — December 23, 2015

Maybe it’s because of the nearly-constant TV showings of the classic holiday movie "It's a Wonderful Life," where George Bailey tries (unsuccessfully!) to kill himself, but everyone seems to share the belief that the highest number of suicides occur during the holiday season. Thanks to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, data [2] show this to be a myth. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

Per the CDC’s National Center for Health Statistics, the suicide rate is the lowest during the month of December. According to Dan Romer, associate director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania, who spoke with NPR radio, November, December, January nationally typically have the lowest rate of the year. They tend to go up in the spring.

Annenberg [3] has been tracking suicide statistics and media coverage since 2000. Its findings are that fully one-half of all articles written during the 2009-2010 holiday season perpetuated the holiday-suicide myth.

It is unfortunate that the holiday-suicide myth persists in the press, Romer said, Aside from misinforming the public, the sort of reporting misses an opportunity to shed light on the more likely causes of suicide.
The CDC cautions the media to abstain from glorifying or describing the suicide act, in the event that it may influence individuals who are particularly mentally vulnerable. Myths like this can create an almost self-fulfilling prophecy that the holidays are supposed to be a hard time, says Ramani Durvasula [4], Ph.D., a psychology professor at California State University, Los Angeles, with a private practice in Santa Monica. He states that the myth is dangerous because suggestibility can contribute to people acting out or, at a minimum, normalizing sadness during the holidays, she says.

If there are concerns for a friend or a loved one, here are some signs [5] to look out for:

**Talk:**
- Killing themselves
- Having no reason to live
- Being a burden to others
- Feeling trapped
- Unbearable pain

**Behavior:**
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs
- Looking for a way to kill themselves (i.e. searching online for means)
- Acting recklessly
- Withdrawing from activities
- Isolating from family and friends
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Visiting or calling people to say goodbye
- Giving away prized possessions
- Aggression

**Mood**
- Depression
- Loss of interest
- Rage
- Irritability
- Humiliation
- Anxiety

If there should be any concern, a great resource is the national suicide prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) where operators are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to assist persons coping with suicidal crisis.

The disconnect between reality and our expectations may drive the idea that holiday blues can contribute to increased deaths from suicide this time of year. Statistically speaking, it is somewhat reassuring to know that this is not true.