

Be there for each other

As I opened some mail last month, the following letter greeted me: “By the time you have read this I will have passed away. I have asked God to forgive me and hope that you will pray for my soul to go to heaven with Jesus.”

In recent months we have had a number of very public figures who have turned to suicide. What makes someone want to kill themselves? While the answers are always complicated, it's usually a mix of anger, despair, hopelessness, depression and pain. Usually the person is not so much interested in ending their lives as they are in ending their pain. In the distant past, the church denied a funeral Mass to those who had committed suicide because it was thought to be an act of despair, showing a lack of faith in God. Today, the church is a bit wiser, recognizing the insights of psychology, and understanding the terrible pain the person is in, and as well as the distorted thinking that can lead to suicide. Today suicides are treated with compassion. Surely the God who created us humans understands the challenges of being human.

How do we prevent suicides? There is no single answer to that question. Talk therapy helps some. Medication can help some. Hospitalization can help some. Specialized training programs such as the Release Technique can help some. We are not all the same, and, consequently, we all don't respond to the same therapies.

Most profoundly, there is free will. God gave us that most challenging of gifts. Life presents us with life and death decisions from time to time. Sometimes people choose death.

Regardless of what does or does not help a particular person, one thing that is always called for is profound respect for the depressed person. They often feel helpless in the midst of their feelings. They don't need judgment or blame or shame. The late Father Stanley Janaites suffered with depression. Back in the 1970s I was visiting him in a hospital, and he said, “Joe, I could feel myself going. I just couldn't stop it.” When a person harms themselves they feel both helpless and hopeless.

The key to psychological recovery is to help people feel bigger than their feelings. At

the moment it is possible to feel overwhelmed by anxiety or depression. If we can get a person to the point where they can feel bigger than their feelings, and therefore can let destructive feelings go, then that person is on the way to recovery. As one psychologist put it: "When we're down, it feels like our feelings have us. When we feel better, we realize we have our feelings. We are in charge of them."

You and I always want to be that healing voice outside of someone's head that can talk to the destructive voice inside someone's head.

And the letter I began this article with did have a happy ending. Somebody was there for that person. That person is alive and in treatment today. No one of us can be there for everyone, but all of us can be there for each other. Listen. Pray. Love. Let go and let God.