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David Fetterman: Suicide prevention is only a call away

By David Fetterman | Special to the Mercury News

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Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It takes the lives of approximately 40,000 Americans each year. On average that equals one person every 13.3 minutes. Young people in particular have a difficult time finding someone safe and knowledgeable to talk to, but it's absolutely essential that they do. Parents and authority figures often have too much emotional baggage and distance.

The story about another Palo Alto High School student who took his life this week puts a human face to these alarming statistics. The story about this young man's tragic passing was brought even closer to home this week.

I was chauffeuring my son around to his routine activities listening to him complain about losing some of his game time privileges.

In the middle of his negotiations about earning his game time back, I received a call from out of the blue from Steven. He found my name on the Internet and just decided to dial my number. It was a Hail Mary call. He started talking about his father. The story wandered. It was disjointed, but increasingly disturbing. The conversation was further complicated because he was deaf and required the use of a translator. The translator was good, but there were times when it was hard to follow who was saying what.

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Suddenly, the tone of his voice changed. He said he was worried that he might do himself

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bodily harm. I told him to call 911 after we finished speaking. "Tell them you are concerned about doing bodily harm to yourself." He agreed to follow my request.

In the meantime, my son was getting anxious about getting to his music lessons. I had to explain why we needed to drop everything and help this person. I was not

convinced that Steven would follow my recommendation. I left messages with local health agencies and eventually reached an emergency services department dispatcher in his town. She assured me they would follow up on this emergency.

I had done as much as I could from 3,000 miles away. My son had overheard much of the conversation and wanted to know why anyone would want to hurt themselves? I did my best to explain how some people can only see the world in their moment of crisis and how in one day their whole world could turn around. We continued our conversation on the way to his lesson.

Just as we were about to get out of the car, a call came in. It was the police. They said "thank you" and wanted to assure me that emergency services had reached him in time. He was being escorted to the hospital as we spoke. It was a relief but still unnerving. Someone had actually received and responded to what felt like my rescue notes in a bottle.

Steven made a call for help, and it was answered in time. However, the system was person-dependent, disjointed and distressful. Putting the moral arguments aside about the right to take one's own life, the annual cost of suicide has been estimated at \$44 billion. This does not begin to assess the psychological damages to his friends, family and co-workers. Suicide can be prevented through education and public awareness. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 800-273-TALK. The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the National Institute of Mental Health -- Suicide Prevention represent additional resources.

At the end of the day, Steven's call, which prompted this distress call for public awareness, may save more lives than his own.

David Fetterman is the president and CEO of Fetterman & Associates, an international evaluation consultation firm. He wrote this article for this newspaper.

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