

When You're Not Your Brother's Keeper

On Monday afternoon, January 9th, in the midst of "The Blizzard of 1996", my brother told his two teenage sons he loved them, left through the front door of his house in Catasauqua, Pennsylvania, walked around back to an embankment of the Lehigh River, put a handgun to his head, and pulled the trigger. Thom V. Geller, age 42, was pronounced "dead" a few hours later at the Muhlenberg Hospital in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. The Lehigh County Coroner's Office ruled the death a suicide -- an intentional fatality.

Can we learn something from this personal tragedy? And are the lessons relevant to industrial health and safety?

Obviously, a suicide is not the same as an unintentional injury or fatality. However, the risk of suicide and accidental personal injury can be increased by analogous personal and environmental factors. And, each type of catastrophe can be prevented with similar intervention.

The bottom line is reflected in the title of this article. If I had been "my brother's keeper," this disaster might not have happened. And if my brother's immediate family, friends, and coworkers had also been more caring with regard to Thom's feelings and behaviors, I feel certain he would be alive today.

What held us back? Why didn't we actively care for my brother, and thus prevent his demise? The factors that held us back are essentially the same as those holding us back from intervening on behalf of another person's safety or health. I'd like to review these barriers to actively caring behavior with regard to my personal loss.

It's difficult and painful for me to write this, and it will be the same for Thom's family and friends to read this. But, if some good can come from this personal testimony and tragedy, then our loss won't be completely futile.

We're Too Busy for Others

Everyone seems so busy these days. There is more to do and less time to do it. I didn't have time to be my brother's keeper. Every year as long as I can remember, the Christmas holidays brought my brother and me together. If we didn't visit in person, at least we talked on the phone. That's every year except this one. I was busy finishing my book on "The Psychology of Safety," and so I did not call Thom for a holiday chat.

Does this sound familiar? Do you get so busy sometimes that you fail to reach out and make contact with important people in your lives? How about at work? Do you see behavior from co-workers that puts them at risk for personal injury but fail to say something?

A few kind words of caring could make a difference, but we're often too busy to take the time to intervene. Besides if they want to put themselves at risk, that's their business -- isn't it? But they might not realize they are at risk. So don't expect them to ask you for help.

People Are Reluctant to Ask for Help

My brother didn't realize that certain feeling states, life events and circumstances put him at risk for suicide. And his friends and family were also unaware of these predisposing factors. But, these factors were there. Marital difficulties in 1995 lowered his self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of belongingness with his family. His multiple sclerosis was beginning to affect his mobility. This undoubtedly decreased his sense of personal control and could have contributed to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and even depression.

Prior to entering his house to get the handgun for his suicide, Thom was shoveling snow alone while his wife and two sons were inside. Did my brother experience acute loss of personal control or

self-effectiveness while shoveling snow? Did he perceive reduced belongingness with his family because they were not outside helping him? One thing I do know, Thom was reluctant to admit to others a loss of control or self-efficacy. At 6'4" and about 230 lbs., he was a typical macho male. Asking for help is presumed to be a sign of weakness, and only decreases one's sense of personal control.

I believe this reflects a primary barrier to interpersonal interaction for occupational health and safety. I've seen workers actively resist an observation and feedback process and a safety coaching intervention for the same reasons revealed in this description of my brother. We are more ready to give another person direction and feedback about job production and quality than we are about their personal safety. We perceive safety as private and believe we need a personal invitation to intervene on private matters. This is a norm work cultures need to change if they hope to reduce injuries below their normal variation.

But it's also possible people don't know how to reach out for help except in a crisis. And even after seeing someone in need, people might not believe they are able to make a difference. This leads me to the next barrier to interpersonal caring -- inadequate communication skills.

We Don't Communicate with Empathy

My sister -- Susan -- and her family saw Thom and his wife at a movie theater on Saturday, January 7th. She hadn't seen him for almost a year and was surprised to see him walking with a cane. After standard greetings, Susan asked Thom, "How are you feeling?" As you might have guessed, his response was "I'm fine". Suspicious about this casual reaction, Susan then asked Thom's wife, "How is he feeling, really?," and his wife replied "Fine". That was the extent of the conversation regarding Thom's health.

They then continued to have a typical conversation about everyday matters. My brother, a “computer junkie,” talked with Susan’s son -- Dan -- about the latest in computer software. Thom’s wife chimed in now and then about her latest “surfing” on the internet. I think it’s relevant that years ago Thom had taught his family about personal computers, and continually kept them abreast of the latest advances in computer technology. The result is a family that probably spends more time “talking” on the Internet than they do with each other.

I worry that people are spending less time communicating in person. With e-mail, phone mail, and the Internet, who needs to waste valuable time finding people in order to talk with them face-to-face? Isn’t typing a computer message sufficient for most communication?

Yes, the chat lines on the Internet are sufficient for business memos and casual conversation, like that between Thom’s and Susan’s families after the movie. But, empathic communication requires sensitivity to feelings, and true feelings cannot be assessed without face-to-face contact. I’m sure you’ve heard many times before that communication, both speaking and listening, involves much more than words. Only by reading body language for feelings can we reach empathic levels of communication.

My real fear is that “computer talk” prevents us from learning how to listen and speak with empathy. Reliance on high-tech communication might actually lead to less desire as well as ability to communicate with empathy. I believe my brother’s sons have weak interpersonal communication skills, and I’m convinced this is partly due to their lifelong infatuation with the personal computer. They have few skills at reading or expressing empathy. If they were more skilled, they might have been able to assess their father’s reduced self-esteem, personal control and belongingness, and then do something about it. But, of course, it’s not their fault. Their computer-focused environment does

not support such “advanced” interpersonal interaction, and they have never received training in proper face-to-face communication.

Of course, communication training is not sufficient for empathic speaking and listening. Practice is necessary, and I fear “computer talk” is reducing our practice time. Could this be one reason for a decreased sense of belongingness or “family” in the workplace? Could increased violence in the workplace be partly due to a decrease in empathic listening? Obviously, if we were more skilled at reading feeling states in others, we would become more aware of warning signals linked to disgruntled coworkers and potential sabotage or violence. And, often sincere empathic listening can go a long way toward defusing destructive feeling states.

Feeling states that increase the risk of suicide also increase the risk of injury and reduce the probability of actively caring behavior. Research has shown, for example, that people with lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, personal control, and belongingness are less willing to help others. And, it’s likely people with such feelings are also more likely to work at risk. Thus, with the potential negative impact of computer talk on empathic communication, we need to develop special action plans for improving face-to-face communication throughout our work cultures, as well as within our own homes.

We Miss the Warning Signs

In December 1995, my brother carried out a practice run of his eventual suicide. With his family watching, he got the handgun, left his house, and walked around back to the river bank. Shortly thereafter, he returned to his house and told his concerned family not to worry, “I just did that for attention.” My sister and I didn’t learn of this incident until after our brother’s death.

I bet most readers are alarmed at the low-key and apparent nonchalant reaction to my brother’s “practice run”. Wasn’t that a “near miss” demanding thorough investigation? Shouldn’t

that incident have led to a change in environmental conditions (like removal of the handgun), and an evaluation of the feeling states that precipitated the incident? Of course, the answer to both questions is “Yes.”

Why wasn't my brother's “near miss” adequately investigated? The answer is simple -- my brother's family didn't know any better. Thom gave them an excuse they could live with and go on with their day's activities. Besides, they didn't have the necessary communication skills to deal with the situation any deeper. Their lack of awareness regarding the human dynamics of the incident prevented their perception of this “warning signal” and a need to seek professional assistance. Of course, the other barriers to interpersonal helping discussed here are also relevant.

Okay, so what's your excuse for not reporting and thoroughly investigating every “near miss” in your life -- from home to the workplace. Are time and inconvenience barriers? Are you reluctant to admit a “near miss” because it reflects a personal mistake or weakness? Or perhaps it's difficult to find another person whom you believe will truly listen with empathy to your story and then give you advice or direction that could make a difference.

A “yes” answer to any of these questions signals a problem needing serious attention if intentional and unintentional injuries are to be prevented. Must we keep learning the hard way that people need to look out for each other? I sincerely hope not. I hope my hard-luck story will motivate some beneficial change in other groups of “brothers and sisters” at home and at work. We need to be our brothers' and sisters' keepers. Please do as I say, not as I didn't do.

I'd like to end with portions of a eulogy written for my brother by his nephew -- Daniel S. Washko. Upon his mother's suggestion, Dan did not read this part of the eulogy at the memorial service. “This will only upset the family and friends present,” said my sister, “We need to remember that this service is for the living.”

It's because the living have a lot to learn about actively caring for others that this portion of Dan's eulogy needs to be reported. It's noteworthy that Dan graduated from Penn State last year with a major in psychology. He understands the value of empathic communication.

...You'd think in the world today, where people can reach out across the globe and touch someone else, there would not be so much loneliness. But this is not so. Too often the ones closest to us are the ones we know the least. Isolation shrouds many people. Maybe that is the way Uncle Thom felt - isolated. But, no person is an island. For those who seem to live surrounded by an ocean, it is our duty to sail out to them and build a dock.

Dan did read the following at the end of the memorial service for my brother. I couldn't write a more relevant closing for an article on the need to actively care for the safety and health of our brothers and sisters.

...Take a moment to show your family and friends that you love and appreciate them. Then think about those people you have not spoken to in a while. Call them, write them, go see them! Let them know that you care and that you will always be there for them. Remember, the cure for loneliness is only a hug or handshake away.

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Note: Dr. Geller teaches empathic communication techniques as part of a two-day workshops on "The Psychology of Safety." Call Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233 for details.