

The Price of Prevention

Category: Suicide

written by Sara Ann Conkling | February 3, 2023

It was Mother's Day and my neighbors had invited me out to brunch. The two of them had met in a diner in New York where Mary was the server and he was a conductor on the railroad. I met them when they decided to retire to Florida and bought the condo next door.

Mary had lost her mother some weeks before. As she described her feelings during our meal, I could appreciate that her grief had teetered into despair. Likewise, Mary was drinking more than usual, and her insobriety scared me. I remember thinking that drunk and despairing are two states that should not be mixed. Still, nothing about our conversation prepared me for what was about to come next.

When we arrived back at our condo complex, Mary's husband walked ahead. I lagged behind with Mary, who I feared might stumble. I never imagined that she would turn around and run into moving traffic on the highway in front of our homes. But that's what she did, and I ran after her and pulled her to safety.

I felt strongly that Mary needed to go to our local ER. She was angry at me for the suggestion, and angry that I had pulled her out of the highway. I finally had the idea to stop insisting for a few minutes and change the subject. Then I observed that Mary's face was very red and that maybe therefore her blood pressure was out of control. I suggested we all go to the ER to get her blood pressure checked. Thankfully, Mary bought into my ruse.

The first chance I got, I pulled the ER doc into the hallway. "Please ask her what happened today after brunch," I pleaded. "Please ask if she ran into traffic. Ask her if she was trying to kill herself."

A few minutes later, the doctor came back out into the hallway. "She is going to hate you for a long time, maybe forever," he said. "But you did the right thing. You saved her life."

Mary had apparently answered him truthfully. The doctor had signed an order for her to be transported to our local community mental health facility.

Mary lived, but our friendship never recovered. I lost my "go to" neighbors, perhaps from shame that I would have never endorsed if given a chance to talk about what happened. It broke my heart.

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The National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline number is 988.
The Lifeline provides free and confidential emotional support

to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress
24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States.
Call or text 988 to connect with a trained crisis counselor.