

September is Suicide Prevention and Awareness Month



Manuel L. Peralta Jr.

In March, I received an email from Christopher Pascale of Branch 822, Appleton, WI. Christopher and I first met when he was going through the NALC Leadership Academy while a carrier for Green Bay, WI Branch 619. When I read his email, it was clear that he wanted to share what his heart had experienced in an effort to help his NALC brothers and sisters. What he shared moved me, and I wanted to share this with you. He has given me his blessings to share the following, so this is from Christopher:

There's an old adage that says you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink. Even if we don't realize it, most of us have known someone who suffers from depression or has suicidal thoughts.

Too often those people don't seek help. There is no shame in being depressed or having suicidal thoughts, and there's no shame in seeking help. For those who think no one will understand, I hope my story encourages you to know that you aren't alone.

My parents weren't married, and my dad was never really around. When I was about 9 or 10 years old, my mom moved me from NY to PA to be with my first stepdad. Anytime we would go to NY to visit family I would try and see my father. He would pick me up to hang out, but his version of hanging out was me sitting in the house while he did other things. He wouldn't cancel his plans or spend any time with me, outside of lecturing me. This was routine even during my teenage years. I remember inviting him to my high school graduation and he didn't show.

As a kid, I moved around a lot and was in different schools. If I remember correctly, I was in five different school districts. When you transfer schools that much, making friends becomes hard. Most kids have their circle of friends established by high school, and I really didn't fit in with anyone's circles. I was an outcast and routinely picked on. I was called names, had lies made up about me, teased, made to feel worthless. I remember one time in middle school, a kid told a teacher I had tripped him just because other kids told him to. Of course, rejection didn't help either. Most kids should be able to deal with this, according to society. It was just more anger, hurt, depression, etc., crushing me.

Everything came crashing down. It got so bad during my senior year in high school. I had suicidal thoughts like crazy. I kept it all bottled up inside. I was, thankfully, talked into admitting myself to get help...I was weaned off the medication after some time.

Things got a little better after I graduated high school. Sometimes I would have thoughts of suicide. I was often angry and antisocial. Getting close wasn't something I did. I stayed too

long in a bad relationship. Too often I still battled my own thoughts about how negatively I felt about myself.

I had to push myself to talk to others, to stop believing the lies I was told about myself. I have gotten a lot better, but am not yet where I should be. Shutting down easily is something I do if I feel unwanted, along with just blocking people out.

It's become a natural defense for me. I don't tell them why, even when they ask what's wrong. I just pretend nothing is wrong. That has recently strained and ended some relationships. Opening up to people is really hard unless I have known them for a long time. It's not easy, but I'm getting better. Even though it hasn't been easy, I am trying to repair my broken relationship with my father.

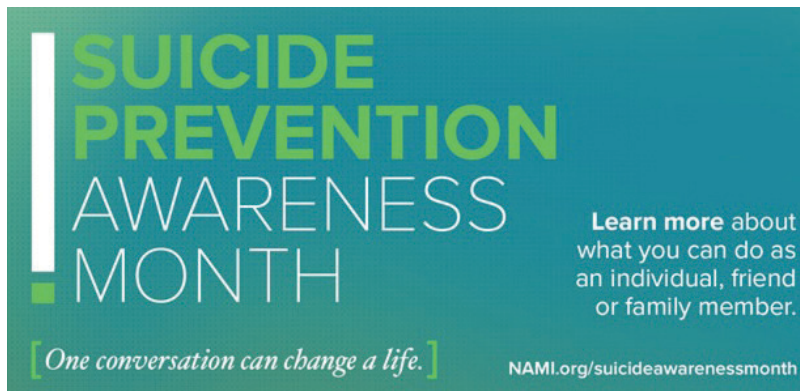
So much that I want to talk about what makes me sad and depressed now. My twin boys are autistic. I try to take it day by day, but some days I get overwhelmed with depression. The fear I have is that I don't know what their future will be like. Not knowing what will happen to them after my wife and I pass is heart crushing. While they are only 5 years old right now, I don't know how far they will develop. Will they be able to graduate school, drive a car, go to college, get a job? Will they have to live with my wife and I until we can't take care of them anymore? Will I be able to save enough money to make sure they are taken care of properly? So many unknowns.

Learning what my limits are is something I am getting better at doing. My limits being when I can handle something on my own or when I need to talk to someone. I'm lucky enough to have people who will listen and try to help me. Another thing is I know is that I can call EAP (1-800-EAP-4YOU) if no one near me is able to help. We are blessed to have such a program available to us, as not everyone has someone they can open up to.

There is so much stress in the day-to-day life right now. Our jobs, especially with COVID-19, demand so much of our time. Then there's going home and trying to manage life outside the office. It's not always easy to find time to relax and unwind from the stress, which can cause mental issues. If you need someone to talk to about what is going on in your life, please don't hesitate to call EAP.

Over the past eight years, I have lost a brother, a fellow union rep and a co-worker to suicide. I could sit here and think what I might have missed that could have been a warning, but I can't change the past. All I can do now is share my story in hopes that it encourages others to seek help. If you know someone who seems to be having a hard time with anything, no matter how small it might seem to you, please suggest that they seek help. If it's someone in your house or office, you can call EAP for them. We all cope with things differently, so please don't tell them it's not a big deal or that they shouldn't be that way about it. That might make them feel ashamed to be depressed and they might just hide it. If they hide it, you might not find out until it is too late. Just remember that you aren't alone and don't have to be.

When we read the above, many of us may relate to his experiences in one way or another. Christopher shared his experi-



On the homepage for our services, you will find “Suicide Prevention” as the second tab. Hovering over that tab, you will find links to the Suicide Prevention Campaign, Self Assessment, Threats, Connected to Life, Facts, Teen Suicide, Losing Loved Ones and Warning Signs. Read. Get involved. Talk about the issues.

The following additional resources are provided to assist you:

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (visit online at suicidepreventionlifeline.org)—We can all help prevent suicide. The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. By starting the conversation and providing support to those who need it, we all can help prevent suicide and save lives. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide—whether you are in crisis or not—call or live chat the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

ences so that you may find comfort in talking about yours. Reach out and share with an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professional. Their ears are there for you.

As I write this, over the past two weeks, we have been watching the Olympic athletes enjoying the competition. The Olympics puts them in the spotlight with expectation and pressure. During Week One, gymnast Simone Biles pulled out of the competition because she did not feel right. The critics could accept a physical injury as justification to pull away, but they could not accept that she stepped away because she did not feel right mentally.

One report I read indicated that on arriving at the Olympic Village, when she expected to be embarrassed, she was instead thanked. She was thanked by the athletes who feel the pressure and know how tough the whole process is. She became a hero of another kind when she stood tall and said it’s OK not to be OK. And she took a breath. And many of us took a breath with her.

Last year in my September column, I commented on an HBO special titled “The Weight of Gold,” centered on Michael Phelps and his effort to shed light on the mental health needs of our athletes. He was one of the first and the most vocal in support of Simone.

It’s OK not to be OK. It’s OK to reach out for help. It’s OK to help each other.

Christopher, thank you for your contribution to this conversation.

Article 35 of our National Agreement provides for a robust Employee Assistance Program (EAP). **Our current EAP Services Provider is New Directions Behavioral Health. The easiest way to connect with them is by phone at 1-800-EAP-4YOU (800-327-4968). The TTY number is 877-492-7341**

You can also reach them via our web link: EAP4YOU.com. This address takes you to the New Directions Behavioral Health home page for USPS employees and their families.

crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals. By starting the conversation and providing support to those who need it, we all can help prevent suicide and save lives. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide—whether you are in crisis or not—call or live chat the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (visit online at samhsa.gov/suicide)—Help for someone you know: Learn how to recognize the warning signs when someone’s at risk—and what you can do to help. If you believe someone may be in danger of suicide:

- Call 911 if danger for self harm seems imminent.
- Ask them if they are thinking about killing themselves. This will not put the idea into their head or make it more likely that they will attempt suicide.
- Listen without judging and show you care.
- Stay with the person or make sure the person is in a private, secure place with another caring person until you can get further help.
- Remove any objects that could be used in a suicide attempt.

The SAMHSA webpages also include a Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator (findtreatment.samhsa.gov), a confidential and anonymous source of information for persons seeking treatment facilities in the United States or U.S. territories for substance use/addiction and/or mental health problems.

Veterans Crisis Line and Military Crisis Line (live chat at veteranscrisisline.net)—Are you a veteran in crisis or concerned about one? Call 800-273-8255 (press 1). Text to 838255. Connect with the Veterans Crisis Line to reach caring, qualified responders with the Department of Veterans Affairs. Many of them are veterans themselves.