

Seven years ago, Beth Smith's life came to a screeching halt when her husband, Scott, committed suicide.

Scott had been suffering with depression, but his death was unexpected and devastating for Smith and their four children.

"My journey with mental illness and suicide – I guess I was pretty sheltered and didn't really feel that it would happen to my family. And it did," said Smith

The traumatic experience turned Smith into a suicide prevention advocate, and lead her into a career with OSF HealthCare as a Behavioral Health Navigator. She spends her time helping people navigate the behavioral health system and getting the correct care for their specific needs.

Smith says a major issue with suicide is the lack of comfort people have with simply discussing it.

"There's a stigma attached with mental illness, there's a stigma that's attached with suicide, and it's a comfort level," she said. You have to be comfortable saying that word, and some people avoid it at all costs because they're scared."

With other community advocates, Smith works to promote suicide safer communities and schools. She says becoming suicide safer goes well beyond awareness.

"It's almost like suicide first aid," Smith explained. "It's not our job to cure a person who may feeling suicidal or hopeless or alone, it's our job to get that person to a safe place where they aren't going to commit suicide or have that opportunity because safety measures are in place, so that as a community as an individual, you are making a difference, and you are becoming suicide safer, and that's our goal."

There is a widely held belief that the suicide rate spikes during the holiday season. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), that is not the case, and December traditionally have the lowest rate of suicide deaths. Smith says suicides are usually planned for weeks, months, or even years, and seasonal stressors aren't usually triggers for a person to commit suicide.

"Ultimately suicide is often related to a mental illness. It's not all the time, we can't rule out other reasons, but the normal risks don't increase related to holiday stress. Business and worry ultimately aren't going to cause someone to commit suicide," said Smith.

However, Smith does say to pay attention to signs that a friend or loved one is struggling with depression or other mental issues. She says one of the best things we can do is to be aware of any changes. She says people who may be feeling hopeless and who are at risk can benefit by knowing others care.

Smith advised, "Taking the time when it's right, in a quiet place, not with a whole group of people, and just asking, saying, 'Hey are you okay? I've noticed that you're not acting like yourself and I care and really worried about you.'"

For someone struggling with suicidal thoughts, they are advised to call 911. There is also a National Suicide Prevention Lifeline that is staffed by trained counselors, is completely anonymous and is available 24/7. That number is 1-800-273-8255.

“It’s okay to reach out for help, and that doesn’t mean that you’re a weak person,” urged Smith. “Really give yourself some credit that you realize that it’s okay – you don’t have to do this alone, and there are people that care.”

Smith and her children, meanwhile, have turned advocacy into a way to heal. They founded [Up With Life](#), a suicide prevention and awareness non-profit that provides education and outreach.

Smith also helped start a non-profit through the Henry County Mental Health Alliance, which has provided trainings to first responders on de-escalating mental health calls, as well as suicide intervention trainings to school districts throughout Henry County. The group also spearheads the annual Henry County Mental Health Walk.