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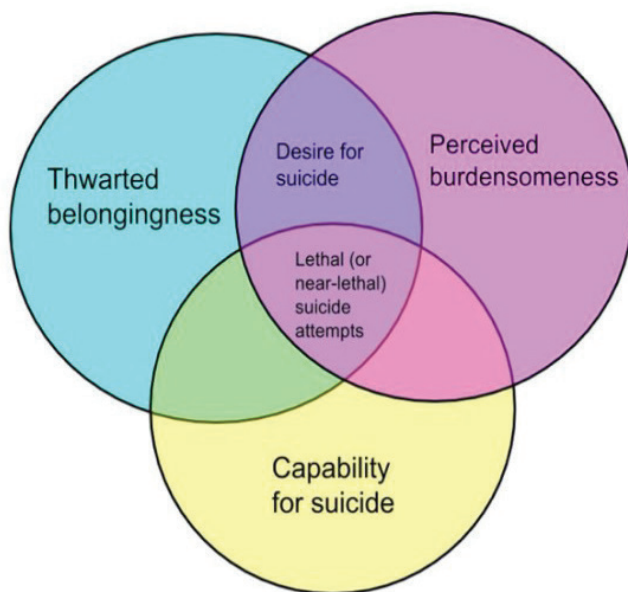
## We Are At Risk

Loice Swisher, MD MAAEM FAAEM

### **SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:**

Entering the medical profession may seriously impact your health. Physicians may be affected by burnout, compassion fatigue, depression, and suicidal ideation. **SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:** During medical education trainees likely will develop capacity for suicide through knowledge acquisition and availability of lethal means.

The life's journey of a physician does not carry a surgeon general's warning; however, there are those who argue that it should. In a November 2016 blog post, Dr. Pamela Wible called for a surgeon general's warning and/or informed consent when entering the medical school as to "be informed of the health hazards inherent in the medical profession."<sup>1</sup> Featuring two medical students who killed themselves, Dr. Wible highlighted the risk of suicide in trainees.



Although there are limited statistics on physician suicide, the risk is much greater for attending

physicians long after training. As with the general population, the middle-aged white male is the largest demographic. Women physicians compared to women in the general population die by their own hand more than twice of general population of women.

Really is this surprising? Physicians learn about death. We overcome fear. We are given access to lethal means. When one looks a Joiner's Theory of Suicide, physicians acquire one factor which will always be there—the capacity to die by suicide.

We are at risk. Because of our education and profession, we are at risk for suicide. And this is not a new thing. Physicians have been killing themselves more than the average person for more than 150 years. The new thing is that we are talking about this.

In 2018, the first National Physician Suicide Awareness Day was brought into being through CORD to "shine a light and speak its name" on physician suicide. There has been increased awareness, however that increased awareness was not enough to prevent Dr. Lorna Breen's death in 2020. Her family has worked tirelessly to pass legislation through congress to support the mental health of first responders. The Lorna Breen Act was passed in March 2022. Yet that was not enough to prevent another emergency medicine physician from dying by suicide this June—again rocking our community.

Awareness and talking about suicide are not enough. I believe we need to intentionally address ways to mitigate each of the three factors in Joiner's Theory. I call for each of us to have a plan for when

crisis comes. Probably each of us has mentally rehearsed perimortem C-section and many of us fortunately will never experience that trauma.



However, it is virtually certain that at some point in our lives there will be a rough road because of our job.

I propose that each of us should develop our own crisis management plan creating the “Red Shield” by focusing on developing connections, remembering our calling (meaning), and practicing self-compassion.

If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts or a crisis, please call or text 988 to reach the Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

#### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT:**

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#### **References**

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