



TEN STEP DRIFT TOWARDS DEPRESSIOIN
By Bill Wilkerson, Co-Founder
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On Addiction and Mental Health

The recent deaths of three professional hockey players – two by suicide, one through a drug overdose, a first cousin to suicide - have rocked the hockey world. The National Hockey League, its union and players' alumnae say they will search for answers to the question 'why.'

Except that may be the wrong question. 'Why' is virtually unanswerable in any individual case. But 'how' is a question we can answer by recognizing what I believe are the Ten Steps Toward Suicide as drawn from our national experience.

The chain reaction inherent in these Ten Steps can be broken and among the most important tools we have are friendship and love which guide the individual to needed professional help and support.

NHL managers, coaches, teammates and alumnae can play a particularly important role. And they have a model to work with. The Canadian Forces have pioneered a peer support program that is now available to the civilian community.

This would be a natural fit for sports where teamwork and mutual support are embedded concepts. The question facing the NHL is whether these deaths indicate some kind of pattern. Well, one thing is fore sure, suicide is not unique to hockey and hockey is not immune to suicide.

Suicide is a societal phenomenon. That said, the NHL can work from the assumption that the concussion-depression link is well-established; emotional isolation and rumination both predict depression; and alcohol and drug abuse routinely accompany depression.

For the hockey world, prevention of suicide begins a lot earlier than the NHL. Minor hockey associations and mental health advocates for children need to join forces. Suicide is the 2nd leading cause of death in Canada of kids at their most formative minor hockey years.

NHL might convene a hockey-wide, nationwide mental health task force and series of 'town hall' meetings. More than anything, we need to talk about this subject as a national community. Canada is one of the few countries with no national suicide prevention strategy.

A 'Hockey Mental Health Summit' would do wonders for public acceptance of these matters and ultimately would save lives.

Derek Sanderson was a Boston Bruins star through the seventies who lost everything to drugs and alcohol. At one point, he lived in New York's Central Park. His teammate and friend, Bobby Orr, reached through those trees and bushes and pulled Derek to safety.

He gave him friendship, a job and a future, and in Derek's own words, 'saved my life.' Preventing tragedy will always happen in the future. That's where we find hope. And that's where hockey needs to look for answers to questions that seem unanswerable.

TEN STEP DRIFT TOWARDS DEPRESSION

1. Emotional isolation.
 - Malignant loss of self-esteem and usefulness
2. Peer pressure and exclusion
 - Deep sense of having lost acceptance, recognition, belonging
3. Void of joblessness
 - Deep sense of lost of identity, self-worth
4. Emptiness of depression.
 - Pervasive loss of the energy and motivation to live
5. Impulse
 - Why not right now
6. Drugs/alcohol
 - Desperation peaks
7. Available means
 - Gun, rope, drugs, locale
8. Family history of suicide
 - Higher risk
9. Youth and children
 - Altered perceptions of death and dying; loss of place
10. Social disadvantage and grievance
 - The profound weariness of perpetual worry and seething.

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