

Why Kay Warren Is Hosting a Gathering for Survivors of Suicide This Week

For the past seven years, Kay Warren has hosted an annual gathering at Saddleback Church in honor of Survivors of Suicide Loss Day.

During that time, Warren said, there have been many strides in mental health awareness.

One thing remains constant, though.

“The pain is the same,” said Warren, who lost her son Matthew to suicide in 2013. “The two hardest deaths to process, and mourn and grieve and walk through, are suicide and murder.”

Both involve deep trauma, she said.

“I think the pain that these suicide loss survivors bring into that room is going to be the same every year. It’s a horrible loss and it takes a long time to begin to recover,” said Warren, co-founder of Saddleback Church.

The event coincides with International Survivors of Suicide Loss Day, which was designated by Congress as a day when those affected by suicide can gather for support. It was created after former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, whose father died by suicide, introduced a resolution in 1999.

This day is commemorated on the Saturday before Thanksgiving since the holidays can be a hard time for suicide loss survivors.

Warren, in partnership with the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, is holding the free Saturday (Nov. 23) event from 9 to 11 a.m. at Saddleback Church in South Orange

County. There will be prayer, testimony from a mother who lost her son to suicide and from Warren, and Warren's story of loss.

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found. In 2017, there were more than 47,000 suicides and 1.4 million suicide attempts, according to the CDC.

Warren and her husband, Rick Warren, pastor for Saddleback Church, have been outspoken about mental illness and grief since their son's suicide. A year after his death, they launched a mental health ministry at Saddleback Church. And just recently, Kay Warren held a new retreat for mothers of children with mental illness.

Warren said it's been encouraging to see church leaders and families joining mental health professionals in talking about mental health and ways to cope with anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder. But still more has to be done, she said.

"Incorporating it into our faith and walking alongside people who have particularly serious mental illness is a place, I think, we're still kind of weak," Warren said.

A 2017 study from Nashville-based LifeWay Research found that many Protestant pastors say their churches want to be helpful to those who are at risk for suicide. But suicide and mental illness are rarely discussed in those churches, according to the study.

Warren said she's seen some signs that Christians are willing to talk about depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder, but more needs to be done "around caring for people with serious mental illness."

"We tend, at that point, to abandon people and say, 'They're too difficult. They cause too much disruption. They're too much of a drain on the resources of a church or the staff,'"

Warren said.

“I don’t see that as Jesus’ response,” she added.

A number of suicides in the evangelical community have made headlines in recent years.

In September, Jarrod Wilson—a 30-year-old associate pastor at megachurch Harvest Christian Fellowship in Riverside who had become a friend of Warren’s—died by suicide. A mental health advocate, Wilson was open about his own depression, often posting on his social media accounts about his battles with mental illness.

In August 2018, Andrew Stoecklein—a 30-year-old pastor of the megachurch Inland Hills Church—also died by suicide.

Warren said pastors and church leaders shouldn’t be put on pedestals.

“I’m a huge proponent for not hiding and getting help,” she said. {eo}

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