

# Hampton Roads military helps raise awareness of depression

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— Navy Chief Petty Officer David Aguirre is passionate about the problem of suicide from wherever he sees it.

And he has two very distinct views.

As the Navy's Suicide Prevention Coordinator for the Atlantic fleet surface forces, he trains others to spot warning signs of depression and mental stress that could lead to tragedy aboard ship or on base. Every command has such a coordinator.

As a husband, he's dealt with a suicide on his wife's side of the family and depression on his side.

But there is hope, whether the view is from 10,000 feet or across the dinner table.

Hundreds of people will bear testament to that hope next month during the fifth annual Out of the Darkness Community Walk at Mount Trashmore in Virginia Beach.

The walk is normally held this time of year to coincide with National Suicide Prevention Week. This year it falls on Saturday, Sept. 11, so it will include a tribute to those who died in the terrorist attacks of 2001.

The walk is sponsored locally by the Hampton Roads Survivors of Suicide Support Group, and nationally by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

Last year, 189 community walks were held around the nation in the summer and fall, from Los Angeles to Allentown, Pa. The Hampton Roads walk was the nation's largest with 1,776 participants, said Chris Gilchrist, a Chesapeake social worker and an organizer of the event.

"With this walk, you can change or even save a life," she said.

Aguirre, a religion program specialist, will address the walkers this year, and there are parallels between his role in the Navy and that of a family man.

The Navy's suicide prevention program aims "to educate, raise awareness and create a climate where people are not afraid to ask for help," he said.

"There is a stigma out there that asking for help is a sign of weakness and some people might be afraid that if they ask for help it will affect their career," he said. "Navy

leadership is genuinely concerned about its people and we want to break down the barriers so our people know it is OK to seek help."

It is a mantra being repeated throughout the military, especially in the Army, which has struggled to control its historically high rate of suicide.

Ultimately, said Aguirre, "the goal is to get sailor-to-sailor contact. They're the ones who are in the trenches every day alongside their shipmates and can really recognize when someone is in trouble."

Sailor to sailor or person to person, it is the same dynamic.

Having worked through depression in his own family, Aguirre said it is important to draw a distinction between general moodiness and chronic depression that can be fatal.

"I think you've got to listen to the person, what they say and how they're speaking," he said, "and they're using words that sound like things are hopeless — I wish I weren't here. I wish I could just go away — that kind of thing."

Raising awareness of depression and suicide is the walk's first goal. The second is to remember those who have died. The third is to raise money.

It is a family event that includes walkers of all ages, said Gilchrist. Contributions are needed and appreciated, but people who simply want to walk are welcome, too.

"We know this is a medical issue, not a moral matter," she said. "We counter that stigma and replace it with hope. And we have reason to hope, because there is help."

The Navy's involvement in the walk isn't new, but this is the first year that all branches of the military in Hampton Roads will participate, including Fort Eustis in Newport News and Langley Air Force Base in Hampton, Gilchrist said.

In Virginia, one out of every four who die from suicide has a military connection, either active duty or veteran, Gilchrist said.

### **Join the walk**

To find out more about the Sept. 11 walk, go to <http://www.sos-walk.org>. To get immediate help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

### **Warning signs**

Signs of depression go beyond general moodiness of someone having a "bad day." Here's a checklist:

Change of appetite, weight gain or loss

Trouble remembering or concentrating

Fatigue, lack of energy, sleeping too much or too little

Feelings of guilt, worthlessness or hopelessness

Neglect of responsibilities and appearance

Withdrawal from families or friends