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UNL counselor warns of Christmas stress

By Barbara Comito
Daily Nebraskan Staff Reporter

The additional stress of finals and deadlines or heightened loneliness brought on by the Christmas season could be enough to drive a severely depressed person to attempt suicide, according to Vern Williams, director of the UNL Counseling Center and professor of educational psychology.

Rarely, however, does one event or series of events cause a person to commit suicide, Williams said. "A person doesn't just get blue for a week and try to commit suicide," he said.

Williams said he thinks there is an undiscovered biochemical involvement in most suicides.

He said he also thinks it is possible for an environment to be so depressing that a person loses all hope that the situation will ever improve, such as children living with and abused by mentally ill parents.

Impatience, said Judy Byrns, assistant administrator of the UNL Psychological Consultation Center, is one of the causes for suicide among young people. They fail to realize that things will change. They don't believe it will get better.

"They don't think about death; they think about not hurting anyone," she said.

They have no understanding of the finality of death, she said.

Williams said many people feel depressed or negative toward themselves for days or a week at a time. "That's not unusual."

Williams said he would distinguish between normal depression and severe depression by the duration of the depression and whether the mental state is accompanied by physical symptoms as well.

Having negative feelings about oneself for more than a couple of weeks plus some disruption in bodily functions — not sleeping or sleeping too much; not eating

or eating too much; or feeling unusually cold or hot all of the time — are signs of severe depression, Williams said.

Campus police have recorded four cases of attempted suicide in 1984, according to Bob Fey, UNL police investigator. Williams and Byrns said they thought that number was low.

"A reasonable estimate might be double that," Williams said.

While in the general population, statistics show that one in four people experiences abnormal depression, Byrns said, she imagines about 50 percent of college students consider suicide.

It is difficult for college students to maintain a normal schedule, Byrns said.

Staying up all night studying and eating irregularly leads a student to "crash" physically as well as mentally.

Watching eating and sleeping habits and trying to maintain a more normal schedule will help in avoiding depression, Byrns said.

Other than that and having someone to talk to, Williams said, there is little a severely depressed person can do for himself.

Soothing music, movies, splurging on yourself or self-help books won't do anything, he said.

Social isolation is typical of depressed people, Byrns said.

Getting out and doing something with other people breaks the pattern not only of being alone but also of not doing anything.

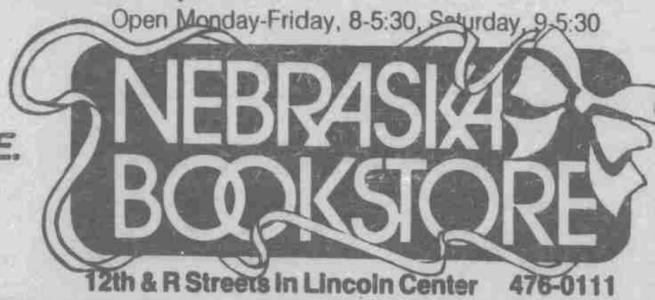
Taking control of oneself and doing something, anything, is better than "not doing," Byrns said. She said she often recommends exercise to depressed people.

Mental health professionals are available to students through several outlets: The personal crisis line, 475-5171, the mental division of student health, the Counseling Center in Seaton Hall and the Psychological Consultation Center in Burnett Hall are a few.

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