

# Reducing Access to Lethal Means

## Transcript of SPARK Talks

Speakers: Cathy Barber and Ralph Demicco

**Cathy Barber:** I'm Cathy Barber. I'm the director of the Means Matter Project at the Harvard School of Public Health. To conversations like this, I always welcome and really warmly embrace two groups: the first is gun owners, and the second is non-gun owners, because this is one of the areas where we can really move the needle on suicide prevention.

Many people are surprised to learn that in the United States that suicides outnumber homicides by nearly 2:1. And that firearms are the leading method of suicide, making up about 51 percent. Gun owners and their families are actually at higher risk of suicide than non-gun owners. And it's not because they are at higher risk of having a mental health problem or of thinking about suicide or attempting. They are just more likely to die should they become suicidal.

I want to explain why gun access makes a difference. First, suicidal crises are often, not always, but often brief. Which brings me to point #2, which is, the lethality of the weapon that's immediately available to them during that brief interval can make the difference between life and death. You substitute anything, virtually anything for a firearm, and your odds of survival go up. There have been dozens of studies that have looked at suicide attempters, followed suicide attempters over time, all finding that 90 percent of people who have attempted suicide do not go on to eventually kill themselves.

So what can we do to put time and distance between a suicidal person and a gun?

So back in 2009, when there was this spate of suicides involving a recent purchase of a gun from Riley's gun shop, Ralph was—the owner of Riley's—he was heart-broken about the suicides and desperate to do something about it.

**Ralph Demicco:** When I realized that three individuals at three different times purchased firearms from Riley's and ended their lives, I was deeply impacted. I could not turn my back. I had to do something. And that something was to assemble a group of individuals from both sides of the fence, the pro-firearms people, the health care professionals, to get them together to lay aside their agendas.

Let's not get on the anti-gun, let's not get on the pro-gun bandwagon, but let's get on the anti-suicide bandwagon.

**Cathy Barber:** I think there is also sometimes an attitude of "oh, if we want to work with the gun community, that means we want to educate the gun community." And it's like "well, not really." It's more like you want to come and say, "Here's what I know, and here's what I'm interested in. I'd like to learn what you know and see if there's ways that we can work together."

In New Hampshire, the Firearm Safety Coalition, which is made up of gun owners, gun shop owners, firearms instructors, gun rights people, mental health people, public health people—all working together. And it was just so fascinating for, I think, both ways, for the non-gun people, the mental health and public

health people, to learn more about the gun shop world, and the values of the people on the gun rights advocacy side. And I think it was really interesting, also, for the gun guys on the committee to learn more about the suicide issues and to realize that we have so much common ground.

At meetings at the Firearm Safety Coalition, sometimes during breaks, I would overhear the gun owners on the committee saying things like, oh, so-and-so's son was having trouble, has really been going through a rough patch, and so we dropped by the house and picked up the guns. And I heard that a couple of times, and that's when I realized—oh, wait a minute, this is like a perfect public health strategy.

**Ralph Demicco:** The Gun Shop Project has two prongs, the first being the dealer-heightened awareness, and we're asking dealers to, even though they are aware and concerned about this issue, to even become more aware—to hang a poster in their shop, to encourage their clerks to scrutinize gun sales, look for abnormal behavior, look for lack of firearms knowledge.

I recall one incident where a very well-dressed woman approached the counter that I was working at, looked down, and pointed to a gun and said, "I'd like to buy that one please," and I immediately sensed something out of the ordinary. Gun buyers don't normally do this. They're fairly deliberate. They look at a firearm, and they say they want to know about features. More than likely, they ask questions pertinent to the firearm. When we ask questions back, we are able to gauge their level of knowledge of that particular firearm or that type of firearm—and that was not present here at all. I looked her in the eye and I said, "Should you really be buying this gun?" She immediately broke down. I took her in the back, sat down with her, and talked with her for a while. She told me her story. I was able to get her help.

Now the second prong is family and friends, a much more difficult area to deal with because the subject is sometimes very touchy. Given historically the stigma attached to suicide, it's very difficult to say to a family member, if Uncle Harry and Aunt Mary break up and Uncle Harry is distraught, it's the right thing to do, if he's a firearms owner, to step in and say, "Uncle Harry, look, you're having a rough time. We're here to help. Can we hold on to your guns until you feel better?" I know it meets with opposition from both sides—oh it's none of my business, and Uncle Harry says it's none of your business—but sometimes, this sort of intervention on behalf of family and friends is critical to saving a life.

**Cathy Barber:** The New Hampshire Firearm Safety Coalition would recommend promoting what we call the 11th Commandment of Firearm Safety, which is "Be alert to signs of suicide in friends and family and help keep guns from them until they've recovered." So for example, say you have a family member who is really struggling with a mental health problem, consider storing your guns away from home until they've recovered. Or, if you're, as the gun owner, if you're the person who is struggling, think about having a spouse, your spouse, change the combination on the gun safe, or lock up your guns and put the keys in a safety deposit box at the bank. You still have control over the keys, the guns, but less access in a dark moment.

So I think we need a call to action on this issue. I think we need to get active. Gun owners, I think, have more skin in the game, because the suicide rates are higher in their community. Non-gun owners, I think, need to kind of set aside any biases they might have about guns and find good ways to work together.

**Ralph Demicco:** As you can imagine, being 40 years in the business, I've experienced an awful lot of incidents where individuals, friends, customers, and acquaintances have taken their lives with firearms, so it's a very striking issue to me in that it has hit home quite dearly. I'm so pleased that the people, the numerous people who attend our meetings, have been able to do this, myself included. Just, let's focus; let's get this very important subject talked about; let's get it understood; and as small as the part may seem, let's do something.

**Cathy Barber:** Twenty five years ago, no one had heard the phrase “designated driver” or “friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” Now everyone has. And we can have the same sort of reach on this issue. Gun organizations are a perfect messenger with their culture around safety, responsibility, and protecting the family. The more that groups like firearm instructors, gun shop owners, gun rights advocates, hunting groups get involved in preventing suicide, looking out for friends and family, looking for ways to reduce a suicidal person’s access to firearms, the greater position we’ll be in to save lives.