

Suicides up for middle-age whites

Wednesday, October 22, 2008 3:19 AM

By Misti Crane

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

More middle-age white people, women in particular, are taking their own lives, and mental-health workers can only speculate as to what might be driving the increase.

Among whites ages 40 to 64, the suicide rate rose by 2.7 percent annually for men and 3.9 percent annually for women between 1999 and 2005, according to a new study led by a researcher at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore.

Those increases brought suicide rates per 100,000 white people to 26.9 for men and 8.2 for women in that age group. Similar increases weren't reported for other racial or age groups.

The findings have experts scratching their heads and speculating about everything from depression fueled by unmet baby boomer expectations to reduced use of hormone-replacement therapy during menopause. For her part, lead researcher Susan P. Baker said she didn't have much idea of what might be at play.

"I'm not much of a speculator; I tend to be a data person," she said.

That said, she spent much of yesterday reading e-mails with women's personal stories about the challenges that come with middle age.

Women are most likely to commit suicide when they are 45 to 54 years old, a time that coincides with many events in women's lives, she said.

Empty nests, bad marriages, hormonal changes and myriad responsibilities to family members young and old all might play into depression, experts said yesterday. Baker also wonders about the impact of prescription drugs and said she would love to see research into that possibility.

Laura Moskow Sigal, executive director of Mental Health America of Franklin County, wondered whether baby boomers are hitting the middle years in a different mental state than generations that preceded them.

"It's very difficult for everybody to get what they wanted. When you realize you're not going to be the master of the universe and besides that you're balding and aging, that's kind of something that baby boomers really have to be aware of," she said.

Mary Brennen-Hofmann, coordinator of suicide-prevention services at North Central Mental Health Services, said the national numbers are consistent with trends she's seen in central Ohio.

People need to be vigilant about warning signs in their friends and loved ones, she said, and signs might be overlooked more often in middle-age women.

She pointed out that men still die of suicide much more often than women. According to statewide figures, suicides among men account for about 80 percent of all suicides.

Explaining increases and decreases is extraordinarily difficult, said Carolyn Givens, executive director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation. But she worries that dwindling dollars for treatment and intervention are contributing.

One thing on which the experts agree: The study should prompt more prevention efforts.

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call 614-221-5445 or 1-800-273-8255.

mcrane@dispatch.com