

An ounce of prevention really is worth a pound of cure

Scientists and practitioners in the field of prevention often tell the story of a town on a river — it could be Springfield, Eugene or Florence.

One day, someone notices a child floating downstream, struggling to stay afloat. Emergency crews rapidly pull the child from the river, but she has drowned.

This sort of thing happens a few more times, and the community takes action: Boats and emergency vehicles are stationed on the river, and some people are saved. But for many, it is too late.

Of course, that would never happen. Someone surely would think to go upriver, find out why people are falling or being thrown into the water and stop it from happening.

If it makes sense to prevent people from drowning, why don't we prevent other things that harm people? Why not go upstream and prevent that harried mother from becoming so frustrated with her child that she hits her? Why not prevent kids in middle school from teasing the girl who is "different," and thereby prevent her from committing suicide? Why not help pregnant women quit smoking so they don't have a low birth-weight babies who are more likely to die during their first year and more likely to develop behavior that leads to delinquency?

Until recently, a reasonable answer to these questions was, "We don't know how to do it."

But in the past 30 years, research on prevention — a surprising amount of it done here in Lane County — has demonstrated that virtually all of the psychological, behavioral and health problems that our communities have been struggling with for millennia can be prevented. Not in every case, certainly, but often enough that the pain and costs to individuals, the health care system and communities could be much less.

There is more good news. Preventing these problems saves significant amounts of money. It reduces health care costs, criminal justice costs and the costs to people who are harmed by preventable problem behavior.

I had the honor of being on a committee created by the Institute of Medicine to review and summarize what we know about prevention. The institute is part of the National Academies of Science, which was created by President Abraham Lincoln to provide unbiased reviews of research in every scientific field.

The committee concluded that we can realistically begin to create communities where virtually every child develops the skills, interests and habits needed to become a caring and productive adult.

Here is just one example.

Tom Dishion, Beth Stormshak and Kate Kavanagh at the University of Oregon developed the Family Check-Up. One version was designed for families with young children.

A supportive group meets with members of the family three times to help them identify what they are doing well and to offer advice about dealing with common problems that come up when you are raising a young child.

The team's careful experimental evaluation with 731 families showed that the program prevented the development of children's behavior problems and prevented poor school performance when the children were 7½ years old. When you think about how costly school failure is, doesn't it make sense to have a program like this available to families who need it?

At the website of the Washington State Institute for Public Policy, you will find a long list of programs and policies that are good investments. For example, the Good Behavior Game, which helps children learn to cooperate and concentrate in class, prevents antisocial behavior and drug abuse many years later and returns more than \$31 for every \$1 spent implementing it.

Websites such as the WhatWorksClearinghouse or the Promise Neighborhoods Research Consortium offer many more examples of tested and effective prevention programs, policies, and practices.

All of these preventive interventions involve creating environments that nurture young people's positive social development. We can help families, schools, workplaces and neighborhoods richly reinforce pro-social behaviors such as helping others, contributing to the community or simply cooperating with others. The result is a growing population of caring and cooperative people.

We can create environments that minimize toxic social conditions such as abuse, neglect, criticism and bullying, and thereby prevent many children from growing up to become lifelong criminals.

We can reduce opportunities for people to engage in behaviors that may be dangerous to them or injurious to others. When we do, we can prevent young people from becoming addicted to drugs.

And we can create environments that encourage people to be clear about their values and to pursue them mindfully and pragmatically, even when doing so seems hard. The result will be communities that are increasingly cooperative and caring and with far fewer problems.

Good prevention practices already are being implemented widely in Lane County thanks to the efforts of organizations such as United Way, Trillium's Coordinated Care Organization, our school districts and research organizations such as the Oregon Social Learning Center.

Thanks to such efforts as these, many more children will arrive at kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed in school. Many fewer mothers will have babies who come into the world permanently damaged by their exposure to their mothers' cigarette smoke, because Lane County is implementing ambitious efforts to help pregnant women quit smoking.

United Way, Success by Six, and the Springfield and Bethel school districts are collaborating to help families of young children in the two highest poverty neighborhoods get the skills they need to succeed once they get to school. Twenty schools are implementing the Good Behavior Game, thanks to some support from Trillium's CCO.

With every passing year, as effective programs, policies and practices are implemented, we will see each new generation become more productive, more community-oriented and healthier.

What can you do? Well, Lane County isn't putting nearly enough resources into prevention. So if you win the lottery, find an organization that is working on prevention and give it some money.

But if you don't win the lottery, there are still a couple of things you can do. One is to ask your school, church, civic organizations and elected officials to increase the use of tested and effective prevention programs.

Another is to embrace the value of nurturing others' well-being, and act on it. Every time you do something that reduces the stress of someone around you — a co-worker, a family member, a clerk at the grocery store — it helps them.

You don't need to be a psychologist to do that. Just smiling at someone in the street is a kind act. Simply telling another about something they did that you appreciated really does make a difference. Getting better at expressing our appreciation for others genuinely can improve their well-being.

And guess what? When the people around you are better off, they will treat you better.

Anthony Biglan of Eugene is senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute. This essay is the second in a series of articles about research-based efforts to improve the well-being of Lane County citizens.