



# UMB Champions of Excellence

## Suicide Prevention Advocate



*Jodi Jacobson Frey, PhD, MSW | University of Maryland School of Social Work*

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For Jodi Jacobson Frey, PhD, MSW, studying social work meant giving a voice to people who didn't always have one. Her goal is to help people overcome their problems while they still have access to resources needed to recover effectively.

"Initially I was doing work with adults that dealt with intense mental health and substance use issues," she says, "but as I started working with my clients I realized that we didn't need to wait until someone hit bottom before there could be change. What if we could intervene earlier? Before they lost their job, and their insurance, and their connection to their livelihood."

Frey, an associate professor at the University of Maryland School of Social Work, lives that mission as the chair of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) subspecialization.

What is EAP? This teaching track prepares social workers for the employee assistance field (outside of the University of Maryland, Baltimore) by educating them about counseling, management and organizational consulting, and crisis intervention in the workplace. As chair of the social work program, Frey oversees the curriculum and the field placements for the students.

"I work closely with the students as they go through the program, and continue to work with them after their graduation and up through their careers," she says.

EAP has helped refine Frey's own research on preventive methods to improve mental health and well-being for working-age adults. The results of her studies can be applied to stakeholders, like employers, to support employees and family members and prevent issues such as depression, stress, anxiety, and substance use and misuse.

"[I wanted to know] how we partner with the workplace as a setting to do public health and psychosocial prevention. What is the role of employers in preventing suicide or improving quality of life, including financial well-being?" says Frey, who is also chair of the school's Financial Social Work Initiative.

Because of Frey's unique focus, she received a multiyear grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2015 to analyze suicide prevention with working-age men. The grant is one of the first in the country to focus on this hard-to-reach population, which often has an unnoticed higher risk of suicide and is reluctant to reach out to traditional mental health services.

"Right now a lot of my research is looking at interventions that reduce suicide ideation and behaviors, and thinking about the role of the workplace and the factors that increase risk, including substance use, depression, financial and legal issues, social isolation, and relationship problems," she says.

To collect meaningful data, Frey has an ongoing project in Michigan, where she works with state partners to promote an online screening used for intervention. The statewide public health campaign, Healthy Men Michigan, encourages use of online screening to assess men's "mental fitness" with a focus on depression and suicide.

To encourage men to participate, the campaign uses mental health marketing with references to words and behaviors associated with common ideas of "manliness" and humor, such as "You can't fix your mental health with duct tape" and comparisons to physical health and well-being such as, "Give your brain a physical [by taking the online screening]." Messaging focused on resilience and strength decreases the stigma by equating physical health with mental health. This approach encourages men to be more open about their mental well-being, creating the possibility for intervention.

Key to her research is assessing the relationship between men's anger and irritability with their risk level for suicide and depression. She's noticed there is a significant correlation between men with a high risk of suicide and higher risk for anger, but these same men may not score positive on traditional measures for depression. This association of anger and irritability is important for understanding how depression is displayed among men in ways we haven't been measuring before or assessing in health settings. The suicide risk associated with these results is something Frey hopes to continue to better understand.

At the end of the online screening, men are told their risk level for suicide and depression and then given resources for traditional and nontraditional community-based services to improve their mental health. So far, her research has shown that 66 percent (two out of three) of the men taking the online screening are at risk for suicide or depression.

The numbers are shocking, but they also show how necessary Frey's research is for catching these warning signs early.

"We're able to reach out to men who are otherwise not connected to any other health services," she says. "They feel less isolated by knowing their responses and seeing their results in comparison to other men."

The impact has not gone unnoticed. After completing the assessment, one participant told Frey the advice on how to improve his mental health reminded him of hobbies he used to enjoy, and encouraged him to take time out to do those activities again. So far, he's enjoying getting back to the things that decrease his stress and already can see an improvement in his overall happiness.

As the project moves forward, Frey wants to include modifications such as messaging about substance use behaviors and more attention to firearm safety. For now, she is still in the data collection stage, but aims to take her research even deeper into the workplace, so more employers can be partners in keeping their employees mentally healthy through early-intervention techniques.

“We want this to be important to employers,” she says, “because having a healthy workforce equates to healthy productivity for the company.”

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