



BY MOIRA MCCARTHY

BREAKING POINT

A quiet mental health crisis has long plagued mountain communities, but the voices calling for change are growing louder.

When Janette Jaynes' job as an East Coast bank executive was phased out and she was offered severance, the 30-something-year-old decided to pursue a dream she'd had since she was young: sell everything and move west to live the ski bum life.

Financially secure enough to take the risk, she packed up and drove her resort-sticker-covered Jeep to Breckenridge, Colo., where she expected to work hard, play a lot, and most of all, savor life in a ski town.

Reality hit fast. Life for many people Jaynes had befriended

in the mountain town was complicated. After seven years in Breck, she moved on to a different Colorado town and went back to work in the finance industry. The sadness, struggle—and yes, death—she felt surrounded by in the ski town had pushed Jaynes away.

"I have experienced so much death since living in Breckenridge," she reflects. "In the seven years that I lived there, I lost track of how many suicides and drug overdoses I knew of."

During her time there, Jaynes had encountered a phenomenon seldom discussed but well tracked—a high propensity of suicides and depression in mountain resort communities.

According to CDC data, mountain destination mecca Wyoming has the highest suicide mortality rate in the country. Since 2015, states in the Interior West—Montana, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho—have all also consistently ranked in the top ten for suicide death. The data is so marked that the Rocky Mountain states have been dubbed "the Suicide Belt."

Why? The reasons are complicated and multifold.

The high price of housing and food. The demand on most workers to hold multiple jobs. The lack of access to mental health care (if one even has insurance). The partying, not just wildly available but touted as part of the lifestyle. The tendency of those who move to ski towns to be a combination of alone—often looking to escape bad relationships or family situations—and fiercely "tough" on the outside. These elements combine in part and sometimes in total to set up many workers for mental health struggles.

Top that off with the industry's propensity to sell the ski life at job fairs as a stoke-filled opportunity to work in paradise, and you have the perfect storm for a mental health crisis.

EXPECTATION VS. REALITY

Those seeking a life of joy, action, and adventure in a ski town often find reality looks quite different. "We, the small workforce, were tightknit, and most worked a stupid amount of hours to afford housing and the 'lifestyle,'" says Jaynes of her time in Breck. "Drinking,

partying, and (although she personally did not partake) lots of drugs, the typical ski resort worker comes to a ski town to have fun. It is a crazy lifestyle that many people cannot handle. I have seen the towns eat up young and old and spit them out."

"It really takes focus not to get sucked in," she adds, and in her view, despite some of the support programs she saw in place around town, not enough is being done to help.

She's not alone in that opinion. More and more, those who have struggled with depression, lost a loved one to suicide, or have just seen the angst in mountain towns are speaking up, taking action, and pushing for change.

Professional skier Drew Petersen has been a vocal advocate on the subject. "Look at how we've rallied around protecting the outdoors and climate change—we have to do the same for mental health," he argues. "We really, really have to."

SAY IT OUT LOUD

The first step in creating change in our mountain resort communities is one Petersen has already taken: speaking about the reality of the situation out loud. In a film backed by Salomon, Hestra Gloves, and the *Mountain Gazette*, Petersen, who has suffered crushing depression since he was a child and masked it for years as a top pro skier, talks bluntly about his struggles, suicidal ideation, and how the ski industry may have added to his health crisis.

"The solution starts with talking about it. We're doing that now. It's powerful," he explains of him being a visible extreme skier who also struggles with mental health. "In sharing my own story, I can see how powerful it can be."

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Pulling back the curtain. Jay Rydd, mountain operations manager at Diamond Peak Resort near Lake Tahoe, used to be a person who accepted the notion that the challenges of life in a mountain town were a fair trade for working in the snowsports industry.

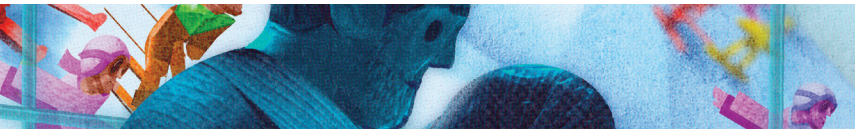
"I propagated the narrative for most of my career," says Rydd. "You know, 'It's a lifestyle trade-off.' But tell me this: What's the positive of that trade-off? You have to spend \$150 on groceries every week; gas is \$6 a gallon; you have nine roommates so you can afford your small apartment. It's bullshit. And the sooner we recognize that, the better we are."

It came to a head for him at the Ski California Lift Maintenance and Operations Education (LMOE) conference last year, when he looked around at the room full of burly mid-level management ski resort guys and blurted out, "F**k the tough guy show."

After two suicides in his community in recent months, Rydd's goal was to pull the curtain back on the issue. He was saying it out loud, he says, as much for himself as for everyone else in the room.

"Our industry, like many, deals with things like mental health in a kind of 'you've got to prove yourself, so shut up and take it' way," he says. But now, Rydd is rejecting that attitude, and he is willing to shout loud and far that the resort industry has a mental health crisis and must do something to fix it.

Power of awareness. Dr. Paul Conti, a psychiatrist, lifelong skier, and author of the book "Trauma: The Invisible Epidemic," who lost his own brother to suicide, says that saying it out loud—and calling attention to the crisis—is a smart step. "Generating awareness is not as hard [as setting up treatment programs]," says Conti. » *continued*



BREAKING POINT

Prompting people to see what is going on inside themselves and in others is an important step, he says. “Making people aware and trying to remove the stigma [around mental health] helps. Showing that you are not alone—and just as important, that this isn’t permanent—can be a huge help [to those struggling with mental health].”

THE OTHER OBSTACLES

At Diamond Peak, Rydd hopes his resort—and all resorts—will pay more attention to things that can contribute to mental health declines and challenges.

Health care access. Ski resort employees—and often locals in the surrounding community—face the same struggles as the rest of the nation: limited mental health resources, insurance policies that barely cover mental health care, mental health practitioners who are overbooked and have little time, and a stigma that mental health isn’t the same—or as vital—as physical health.

But those familiar with the issue say that ski area operators must proactively find ways to help struggling mountain employees, not just in times of crisis.

Compensation is another thing, of course. “If you’re struggling to put food on the table, it can truly contribute to mental health [challenges],” says Rydd. “For decades, this industry has been so underpaid. I’m not a fan of paying people just to breathe, but I do believe in paying people what they are worth.”

Resort operators often look for ways to increase the bottom line at the expense of employees, which can and should change, says Rydd. One example: the practice of “sending the parking lot person home on a slow day instead of finding another thing for him or her to do,” says Rydd. This slashes hours for the employee in favor of saving dollars for the business, destabilizing the reliability of an often already low income for someone trying to afford an inevitably high cost of living.

“There’s money there to figure all this out for those people,” argues Rydd. And

indeed, some operators have dedicated considerable time and energy to providing employees with consistent income and hours by, for example, cross-training staff to move between departments during slow periods or more methodical scheduling.

Cultural change. For change to happen, culture needs to change, and resources are needed to do that. “Build a culture that celebrates and honors taking care of your mental health,” says Peterson, and “build a system and infrastructure to do just that.”

How? Says Petersen, “The truth of the matter is: It needs money.”

COMMITTING RESOURCES

Vail Resorts has been digging into the issue for eight years now, says Dr. Corey Levy, a psychologist and senior manager of wellness for the company.

As part of its Epic Wellness employee assistance program, all employees at Vail Resorts properties as well as their dependents and household members—regardless of full-time or part-time work status—have no-cost access to:

- **Six counseling sessions** (currently available virtually) each year for a variety of topics, including stress, anxiety, depression, substance use, and grief and loss, among others.
- **Preferred providers/therapists** (at certain locations) familiar with the company and its benefits who employees can connect with directly to schedule their sessions.
- **On-site and virtual wellness presentations** covering everything from the technical (e.g., how to find more mental health resources within your existing insurance) to the more nuanced (e.g., how to recognize and help a friend/coworker in crisis), and a wide variety of additional mental health tools.
- **“Caring for a Coworker” resources** to proactively empower all employees with the ability to help those around them.

Community effort. The goal of the program, says Levy, is to use a “community psychology” approach to at once raise collective awareness and make more open the conversation around mental health, and give resort workers and their close friends, roommates, and family access to immediate help. “Resort communities are primed for community psychology,” says Levy. “There’s a lot of intimacy there, where people are able to help one another out.”

The company also celebrates “Epic Wellness Month” each January, with events, giveaways and other programs to raise awareness around all health issues—mental and physical.

Additionally, Vail Resorts partners with local resources, like the Eagle County Mobile Crisis Treatment Units in Colorado, to support employee access to care. The Eagle County program, for example, has therapists physically “meet you where you are at” when you call for help.

Levy says the Epic Wellness program seems to be making an impact—Vail Resorts has seen usage of its mental health offerings jump from one percent of staff to about nine percent.

Levy acknowledges that there is still more to do, but he feels positive about the work. “This is one hundred percent the right thing to do,” he says.

POTENTIAL PARTNERS

The Speedy Foundation was founded in honor of 2010 Olympic silver medalist Jeret “Speedy” Peterson, who lost his battle to depression via suicide in 2011. According to executive director and co-founder Shannon Decker, the Speedy Foundation aims to bring positive change to ski communities by both sharing Jeret’s story and creating tangible programs to better address suicide and be proactive with mental health awareness and action.

Decker, like others, points to the party culture and low pay rates as primary contributors to the crisis in ski towns. “People used to be able to make a living and buy a home,” she says. “This is no

longer the case.” A tendency to “sweep things under the rug” (like abuse and mistreatment), and some science that hints at depression being more common at altitude also contribute.

To combat the crisis, the Speedy Foundation has created something it calls “Mental Health First Aid Training,” a program it brings to resort towns and businesses to help set those employers up to better work with employees on mental health.

The foundation has trained the staff of the entire U.S. Ski Team, but it has not heard from a single resort—yet. The U.S. Ski Team, Decker hopes, will show leadership in this arena. “They can change the culture and set the standard,” she says. “This has to come from grass tops and grass roots.”

She has no doubt the foundation is making a difference. “The Speedy Foundation has saved lives, definitely, and it feels good,” she says. “It’s hard, it’s heavy, but my god, this is the information we need,” she says of mental health first aid.

Aspen Strong is another organization working to improve mental health in resort towns.

Executive director Angilina Taylor says the pandemic may have brought a silver lining to the resort town mental health epidemic by making us all more aware of and in touch with our own mental health. “The pandemic pulled the lid

off it,” she says. “People are feeling a lot more comfortable reaching out.”

Aspen Strong’s goal is to “demystify and normalize” mental health overall. The group offers trainings (it recently provided one for Snowmass, Colo.), sets

“When you make the decision [to seek help] and you keep coming up against closed doors, like ‘the therapist cannot see you until May,’ you tend to just say, ‘Forget it. I’m fine.’ We want to change that,” she says.

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up online and easy-to-access mental health screenings that can help a resort home in on the mental health challenges and triggers at its unique operation and customize programs and responses, and works to provide more direct access to mental health care providers for mountain employees, all with the aim of decreasing the number of suicides industry-wide.

Right now, Aspen Strong offers 10 free mental health appointments to anyone in need who cannot access or afford them—and should a person need more, they can reapply right away.

It is also working on insurance credentialing—so more therapists can take more types of insurance and open up access for those in need, which Taylor sees as vital since roadblocks and hurdles can scare people away from seeking treatment.

MOVING AHEAD

There’s no doubt employee wellness—from being able to afford food and housing to access to proactive mental health care—is of high urgency for the industry at this point, says Rydd.

“Anyone who has been in this industry long enough has an easy ‘yes’ to the question ‘have you lost anyone to suicide or drugs?’ It’s everywhere,” says Rydd. “I’m not an extrovert at all, and I don’t enjoy the spotlight. But if we don’t talk about this—and do something now—it will never get better.”

“We all know skiing has enough money [to take this on],” says Petersen. “My hope is that I am not the only spokesman for mental health in the ski world. Right now, it kind of feels like that. I hope we hear more. I hope it gets loud. It’s time.” ■

“F**K THE TOUGH GUY SHOW.”

