Postvention as Prevention

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The term “postvention” is a great example of suicide prevention jargon that means little to those outside the field and may actually contribute to misunderstanding. Postvention refers to activities which reduce risk and promote healing after a suicide death. Although postvention is implemented after a suicide it is essential that we prepare for postvention before a suicide – by, for example, training first responders, coroners, funeral directors, faith leaders, emergency departments, clinicians, and journalists.

Research has firmly established that family members of individuals who die by suicide - including parents, children, and siblings - are at increased risk of suicide. They are often referred to as “survivors” which is another confusing term, particularly as attempt survivors have become an increasingly important voice of hope and resilience in the suicide prevention community. Better terms for those who have lost a loved one to suicide include loss survivors and individuals bereaved by suicide.

Picture a suicide death as a pebble dropped in a pond. While the first and biggest waves hit the family and those closest to the decedent, the impact spreads outward to others exposed to the death such as friends, witnesses,
postvention is prevention. Suicide prevention efforts should include a comprehensive postvention component that reduces risk and promotes healing for the immediate family and reaches out into the community to support the broader group of loss survivors including friends, coworkers, first responders, treatment providers, and others exposed to the death. Toward that end, the National Action Alliance Suicide Loss Survivor Task Force has just released a seminal document, Responding to Grief, Trauma, and Distress after a Suicide: U.S. National Guidelines [3].

Suicide prevention should be a three-legged stool including prevention, intervention, and postvention. Yet too often, postvention has been the missing leg. It is time to make postvention an integral part of our comprehensive suicide prevention efforts.

To learn more about Ken Norton’s perspective on postvention, watch his SPARK Talk [4] on Suicide Postvention as Suicide Prevention.

Links within this resource