Suicide Prevention as a Social Movement

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The authors of a recent article argue that suicide prevention practitioners, researchers, and advocates can have a greater impact if they understand the role of suicide prevention as a "social movement" — "an organized activity that encourages or discourages social change." They also argue that a key step in the development of a social movement is a shared understanding of the movement’s history.

The goal of this article was to both confirm and expand the notion of suicide prevention as a developed social movement by examining the understanding of the movement’s history shared by leaders in the field. The authors surveyed 27 leaders in suicidology and suicide prevention about the major theories and events in suicide prevention. The authors concluded that the history of suicide prevention as an organized field, as well as the consensus they identified about the “most impactful events in the suicide prevention movement,” demonstrates that suicide prevention is now “an established and coordinated entity” that can create change at the societal level.

Events identified by the experts as playing a major role in the development of suicide prevention include the creation of Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA), the American Association of Suicidology (AAS), and the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention; the passage of the Garrett Lee Smith Memorial Act; and the creation of the first national suicide prevention hotline. Additional evidence for the emergence of suicide prevention as a social movement includes the appearance of national and international suicide prevention publications, including the Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent Suicide, the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, the journal Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior, the Institute of Medicine report Reducing Suicide: A National Imperative, and the World Health Organization report Prevention of Suicide.

The authors’ research also revealed that “a small number of people have had a significant influence on this field in its short history.” These people include Edwin Shneidman and Norman Farberow, who were involved in four of the 10 “most impactful theories in the field of suicidology” as well as a number of the important events in the history of suicide prevention, such as the creation of the first suicide prevention center and hotline and the founding of several of the significant organizations in the field.

The authors identified the most important theories and events in the history of suicide prevention by surveying 27 leaders in the field. The 60 theories and publications and 81 events included in the survey were identified by conducting a literature review and by consulting members of the American Association of Suicidology listserv. The model of social movements used in this analysis was developed by John Macionis, the author of widely-used college sociology textbooks.


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