Getting Comprehensive in Our Suicide Prevention Efforts

April 06, 2018

News Type: Director’s Corner
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In my work with states, tribes, campuses, and institutions around the country, I’m often asked, “What program should I use to prevent suicide in my community?” Perhaps to the person’s frustration, my answer is usually, “It’s not that simple.” True, it’s good to know which programs have more evidence of effectiveness, but no one program or approach can turn the tide in any setting. Many well-intended but limited efforts, such as awareness campaigns or gatekeeper training, will only succeed if health care systems are prepared for referrals, institutions have good crisis response protocols, emergency departments provide follow-up support after discharge, and other strategies are in place. Just one program isn’t enough—it takes multiple strategies working together to reduce despair and death in our states, communities, workplaces, health care systems, and schools.

As the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention’s Transforming Communities [1] paper points out, the few examples of community-based programs that effectively reduced suicidal behaviors all involved numerous strategies working together. One of the first successful suicide prevention programs in the U.S., the Air Force Suicide Prevention Program [2], consisted of 11 different components, including leadership involvement, education and training, and an integrated delivery system. Other examples, such as the European Alliance Against Depression [3] and the Model Adolescent Suicide Prevention Program [4], also involve different strategies working together and reinforcing each other to weave a web of safety in the community. Comprehensive approaches are more effective in health care settings too: the Zero Suicide model [5] is not just about training providers, but also focuses on engaging leadership and changing key components of the health care system to support safer suicide care.

So where does that leave suicide prevention professionals and groups who aren’t sure what to do? Well, fortunately, SPRC’s Comprehensive Approach to Suicide Prevention [6] outlines the different strategies that can work together to increase the likelihood that your efforts will be effective. It includes identifying those at risk, addressing crisis response, reducing access to means, ensuring effective treatment, and supporting care transitions, as well as strengthening protective factors like life skills and resilience. The comprehensive approach is one of the three components of SPRC’s Effective Suicide Prevention Model [7], which includes a strategic planning process [8] that can help you figure out which strategies are best for your community or setting. And while this kind
of comprehensive approach may seem complex, remember that initiatives like this require multiple actors and organizations coming together and sharing responsibility to succeed. That’s why partnerships and collaboration are key in any suicide prevention effort.

So, next time you’re wondering what program will reduce suicides in your setting, I’d ask you to rethink the question, and instead ask: “What combination of strategies will help reduce risk and improve protection for the most vulnerable groups in my community?” SPRC’s effective prevention model has the tools to help you and your partners find the answers to that question. The more we can move to a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to preventing suicide, the more likely we are to succeed in our efforts and save lives.

Links within this resource