

Engaging Suicide Attempt Survivors

Transcript of SPARK Talks

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My name is Barb Gay. I'm the executive director for the Area Substance Abuse Council located in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. I also was a member of the Suicide Attempt Survivor Task Force for the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention.

I think adding the voice of suicide attempt survivors into the field of suicide prevention is essential. I believe that lives can be saved. I believe that deaths by suicide can be prevented. I believe people can recover and lead full and productive lives. I believe this because I have survived my own suicide attempts. Because I live my life in recovery. Because I work in the community mental health field.

When suicide attempt survivors work with suicide prevention providers, we can improve the systems that are charged with providing care: primary care, crisis and emergency care, behavioral health care.

Suicide attempt survivors want providers to talk directly about suicide. To talk about suicide with compassion. To ask the individual who is experiencing suicidal thoughts what it is they need to be safe. Oftentimes, there's silence that surrounds suicide. And the questions that are asked, are asked with a presumed response. A question like, "You aren't thinking about suicide, are you?" really shuts down the person who might have been thinking about suicide and was ready to share. Instead, asking a question with compassion and saying, "When people sometimes experience and feel the way you're feeling, they think about ending their lives. Are you thinking about ending your life?"

Talking about suicide with someone who has had an attempt, or someone who is thinking about suicide, won't cause them to make an attempt. It will make them feel cared about. Make them feel loved. It will treat them with respect and dignity. And will help find a way to make them well.

Often there's a lot of fear when someone starts talking about ending their life. The common response that I've heard is to use the emergency room or call for 911. We make an assumption about what someone needs to be safe. We think they need emergency medical care. What they get are sirens and lights, lots of attention, lots of people in uniforms that have weapons and handcuffs. We don't ask them what they need to be safe.

When we listen to suicide attempt survivors, and we learn what their stories are and what they would've liked to have happen, we can create alternative responses to keep people alive.

In my community, we use mobile crisis counselors to come onsite. Instead of first responders, we have two crisis counselors who arrive in an unmarked car, in their normal everyday clothes. No weapons, no handcuffs. They sit and talk with the individual who's experiencing suicidal thoughts. They hear what's causing their pain. They listen to their reasons for living; they listen to their reasons for dying; and they collaborate to make a plan of action to keep that person alive.

Take the opportunity to work with suicide attempt survivors. Engage them in your work. Make them a part of your team. Ask them to join at all levels of your organization and not just be a guest. I'm an employer as well. Our goal in hiring is to bring on counselors who are compassionate and caring, and for them to be able to use their stories and their successes to treat others.

Suicidal thinking can happen to anyone. I've had thoughts of suicide. When we engage suicide attempt survivors and suicide prevention practitioners, we can transform the care and the responses that our systems give to save lives.