Suicide Prevention and Connectedness

A SAMHSA PERSPECTIVE
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Why People Die by Suicide-Joiner

- Those who die by suicide have to want to die and to also have the capacity to kill themselves.
- Joiner terms these “suicidal desire” and “suicidal capacity”
Suicidal Desire

- Who wants to die by suicide?
- Failed belongingness
- Perceived burdensomeness
Suicidal Desire

- Failed Belongingness-the desire to connect with others, and to belong has been thwarted

- Perceived Burdensomeness- A connection is experienced, but that connection is experienced as an anchor, dragging down those who are closest
Suicidal Capacity

• Even those who want to die don’t come easily to a final act of lethal self-destruction.

• Joiner argues that those who die by suicide must gradually build up to it.

• They must become gradually desensitized to their natural human fear of death and pain.
Suicidal Capacity

- Suicide attempts are the most obvious way in which suicidal capacity is acquired.
- Not all those who die by suicide have a previous attempt.
- Suicidal ideation, exposure to trauma and violence, are some of the alternative ways that this capacity is acquired.
Suicidal Capacity

• Since we do not yet know how to reverse suicidal capacity, it is essential that we work to lessen the desire to die among those with suicidal capacity by increasing connection and decreasing their experience of themselves as burdens.

• Youth who have attempted suicide represent a very high risk group because of their demonstrated capacity to inflict self-harm.
Issues in Connectedness

• Primary prevention of suicide could focus on building connections and a sense of belonging prior to the development of acute symptoms.
• The promotion of connection is still very important after the development of symptoms.
• Social withdrawal is an important symptom of depression. Reversing this is important for recovery.
Issues in Connectedness

• Who you are connected to may also be important.
• For example, do the connections among highly distressed suicidal youth play a role in suicide clusters?
• Sources of Strength is an example of a program that tries to get at this through the promotion of positive teen leaders
Connection and the Suicidal Crisis

- A deep sense of isolation is typical in a suicidal crisis.
- Terry Wise- “An essential predicate to my emotional health was to reduce my sense of isolation. Ironically, that very sense of alienation was perpetuated by having to live in a private world of suicidal thoughts that I could not share with anyone—or so I thought.”
Connection and the Suicidal Crisis

• Suicidal thoughts are themselves isolating.
• Therefore, being able to talk about suicidal thoughts is itself an intervention.
• ASIST Video is a demonstration.
• Talking about suicide in a life affirming way may itself be a potent intervention by decreasing isolation.
Connection and Public Awareness campaigns

- Awareness campaigns-VA,DOD, SAMHSA, Indian Health Service
- Key message is that you are not alone
- “Never leave a Marine behind”
- VA-”It takes the courage and strength of a warrior to ask for help.”
- Promotes help seeking but also conveys the implicit message, “We are here for you”-Las Vegas story
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

- Advantage of a suicide prevention hotline is that it is always there, a potential connection in the middle of the night or when no one else is present.
- 145 crisis centers answering the number 1-800-273-TALK, that’s 273-8255. They back each other hope so that each call can be answered without ever getting a busy signal so that a human voice is always available.
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

- SAMHSA evaluation studies have shown that making a good connection with a caller was an essential component of successful outcomes.
- Also showed seriously suicidal people call the line.
- Many suicidal people are ambivalent right up until the final moment, so a connection to another human at a critical moment being can be life saving.
- Kevin Hines story
National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: Promoting Connection

- Hotlines aim to encourage people to call before making an attempt.
- Lifeline is reaching out to suicide attempt survivors
- Lifeline Gallery
- Social networking sites
Social Networking

• We are just starting to understand both the potential and the risks.
• SAMHSA Summit, White Paper, and Revision on CDC Media Guidelines
• Lifeline work with Social Networking Sites
• Story
Suicide Attempt Survivors

• Lifeline PSA’s and Lifeline Gallery try to tell their stories, to communicate that there is hope and that there is help.

• In the Garrett Lee Smith grants we have asked our evaluators, Macro International, to obtain information about how grantees are working to connect with youth suicide attempters.
Suicide attempt survivors

- Having made a suicide attempt is the strongest single risk factor for later death by suicide.
- Research (Beautrais) indicates that many go on to die by suicide or to make additional non-fatal attempts.
- However, many do not follow up with services.
What is effective in preventing suicide?

- Only two RCT’s have demonstrated a reduction in deaths by suicide.
- Both involved following up and connecting with high risk persons after an acute suicidal crisis.
- Motto caring letters study sent non-demanding letters to those who refused treatment after leaving inpatient units. The intervention was a connection.
Fleischmann et al (2008)

- Randomized controlled trial; 1,867 suicide attempt survivors from five countries (all outside US)
- Brief (1 hour) intervention as close to attempt as possible
- 9 F/u contacts (phone calls or visits) over 18 months

Results at 18 Month F/U

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Died of Any Cause</th>
<th>Died by Suicide</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Usual Care</td>
<td>~2.5%</td>
<td>~0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brief Intervention</td>
<td>~1%</td>
<td>~0%</td>
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Appreciating the Complexity of Connectedness

- Not only is an individual connected to others but do they experience themselves as helping to lift others up, rather than dragging them down.
- Understanding the role of burdensomeness
- Shawn Shea puts it eloquently;”Death is sometimes chosen as the only alternative by people who feel deeply alone or shamed, yet are profoundly loved and respected.”