Advancing Peer Support in Suicide Prevention

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Peer support has long been recognized as important in prevention. Those bereaved by suicide loss – that is, the family and friends of people who have died by suicide – form an essential and active part of the suicide prevention community. It is difficult to think of a major suicide prevention organization or initiative that does not include persons bereaved by suicide. Those who have lost a loved one to suicide are reaching out and supporting one another in support groups as well as providing support and advocacy for suicide prevention.

The revised National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (NSSP) states that “peer support plays an important role in the treatment of mental and substance use disorders and holds a potential for helping those at risk for suicide.” The NSSP also points out that mental health consumers have come to be an important peer-support resource in recovery services. Peer support is not a substitute for mental health treatment, and we should not promote peer support to those who may not be ready to provide support to others. However, there is evidence that peer support can assist the recovery of those who have experienced suicidal crises, including attempts.

Many suicide attempt survivors have bravely shared their stories in support of suicide prevention and others who may be at risk. Yet the participation of suicide attempt survivors is not yet as overt or as organized as that of persons who have survived the loss of loved ones. However, this is starting to change. Two examples of efforts to provide forums for survivors of suicide attempts are Live Through This [1] and What Happens Now [2]? People who have survived suicide attempts have experienced reentering a workplace, classroom, or family after an attempt or hospitalization. They can address this experience with authenticity.

We should look to what is happening in the mental health community as a model for involving attempt survivors in suicide prevention. But attempt survivors can do more than support their peers. They can also help us understand what resources and supports are needed to assist attempt survivors in their journeys to recovery. The Suicide Attempt Survivors Task Force, [3] of the National Action Alliance is creating a framework to help engage and empower suicide attempt survivors as suicide prevention champions at the local, state, and national levels. I look forward to the results of their labor.
We need to expand efforts to encourage and support attempt survivors in bringing their expertise to the struggle against suicide, and their firsthand experience with facing and triumphing over suicide to others at risk through peer support networks. And we need to continue and expand opportunities for members of a wide range of cultural and ethnic communities, as well as youth, veterans, and the LGBT community, to organize and provide support to their peers, as well as to share their ideas and experience to the field of suicide prevention. We all have a role to play in this effort.

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