Helping Individuals in Overcoming Suicidality

Overcoming suicidality by revitalizing worthiness refers to the process whereby a suicidal person establishes a sense of value as an individual who is deserving of life. This process involves moving from a death orientation to a life orientation; from darkness to clarity and purpose. Health professionals can facilitate this process by:

- Conveying a sense of belief in an individual’s value as a person.
- Facilitating self-discovery and acceptance.
- Challenging the ‘dark’ side and reinforcing the ‘bright’ side, inspiring hope and optimism.
- Engaging in a collaborative system of working ‘with’ rather than ‘on’ the individual.
- Providing practical help in times of crises e.g. staying with and talking to a person.
- Encouraging engagement in validating activities and interactions.

Health professionals demonstrating a belief in the individual provides positive feedback about their worthiness and encourages them to undertake new challenges. In overcoming suicidality, the individual must reconnect with the world. Health professionals can facilitate this process by:

- Conveying the possibility that suicidality can be an enriching experience for moving forward with a new sense of being.
- Facilitating the reclaiming of important aspects of oneself which were previously denied due to shame and fear.
- Encouraging independence and self-acceptance.

Health professionals have the power to enhance or reduce opportunities for people who are suicidal to make sense of their lives and regain control.

Other Leaflets

- A Personal Guide to Overcoming Feelings of Suicide.
- A Families, Carers and Friends Guide to Understanding and Responding to Suicidality.

Useful Resources


Electronic versions of these leaflets and other resources are available on www.pisa.dcu.ie

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“She listened in a very different way... she was collaborative, she was very open... it wasn’t that it wasn’t very challenging, but there was the relationship that was there, and it was so significant”.

From a Death Orientation to a Life Orientation – How Can You Help?

A Health Professionals Guide to Understanding and Responding to Suicidality
Introduction

The information in this leaflet is based on research conducted at Dublin City University (DCU), which was funded by the Health Research Board (HRB).

In this research, 17 suicidal men with an average age of 25 years were interviewed. These men described how they overcame their urge to die when they were helped to regain their sense of value as an individual who deserved to go on living.

The study provides a theory for understanding how young men overcome suicidality and begin their individual recovery by revitalizing their worthiness.

Background

Rates of suicide and suicidality have increased in recent years. Research suggests that:

- There is inadequate guidance for professionals working with suicidal people.
- Many professionals who come into contact with suicidal individuals are ill-equipped to respond in a helpful or meaningful way[1].
- The initial care received by individuals who engage in suicidal behaviour has the potential to profoundly influence their help-seeking behaviours and future episodes of suicidal behaviour/completed suicide[2].

If access to services is to be improved and responses to suicidal people are to be helpful, there needs to be a greater focus on the image portrayed by services and health professionals, the nature of their responses and the availability and quality of services provided in follow-up.

This leaflet provides information for practitioners to draw on to enhance responses to suicidal individuals at different points in their journey through suicide and life.

Interacting with Suicidal People

People who are experiencing suicidality have lost their way in life. They feel on the outside and are unsure about whether or not they deserve to live. Questioning their personal worth, they strive to conceal their ‘dark side’ from themselves and others, thereby becoming invisible and voiceless.

Health professionals can promote help-seeking and gently challenge this withdrawal from self, life and others by:

- Acknowledging the immensity and importance of their decision to seek help.
- Recognising a person's distress and suicidal desire
- Establishing a safe context for reflection and disclosure of inner turmoil.
- Refraining from using professional jargon and avoiding exclusionary and judgmental actions.
- Confronting social myths that portray a suicidal person as weak, bad and/or mad.

“At the time the powerlessness, the injustice, the lack of being heard, was excruciating. It was absolutely horrific... when I think back to it I feel quite upset and angry”

Just as negative encounters can have a detrimental effect on an individual, positive experiences can enhance worthiness and facilitate further engagement with professionals. It is important that health professionals remember that:

- Suicidality is a response to an individual’s life situation and not to them personally.
- Suicidal individuals are not motivated by the desire to punish others and do not have a lack of regard for others; concern for loved ones is often a key preventative factor but can also lead the person to feel like a burden.
- Sensitive, genuine and empathic responses are necessary to convey understanding and hope, and for validating the person and their unique situation.

Suicidality escalates when an individual has too few memories of constructive coping and cannot envisage positive coping in the future, leading to helplessness and hopelessness. Tension and turmoil mount until it is not possible to live through another day, making suicide a viable option.

Therefore, while not condoning suicidal acts it is important for health professionals to remember that suicide is viewed as a logical option for individuals in the context of their lives and that suicidal individuals do understand the finality of death.