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Grassroots Suicide Prevention in a Youth Education Setting

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Introduction

Since the last article, in November of last year, we continue to work in a holistic way with our students and to help them make connections with professionals who may be a source of support when students are in crisis. We also recognise the students' diverse needs whether it be for food, accommodation or developing emotional and relationship skills. We see that suicide is often linked with a "same day crisis". We aim to teach practical skills that will grow resilience and then empower students to choose who they would like to support them. A sense of having options at a time of crisis may help prevent suicide.

Background

Students I work with at the Youth Guarantee course are aged between 15 and a half and 19 years old. They want a second chance at achieving a high school qualification. Thirty-two percent of our students last year were Māori and 60% were Pākehā. Six percent were Pacific Islanders. The remaining 2% were from other cultures. There are many reasons why mainstream schooling hasn't been effective for them. Some have had behavioural issues and have been asked to leave school, some have been bullied at school and others have had issues outside of school which have meant that they have lost focus or motivation. Eighteen of the 50 students this year are living away from their families. Some have already had several court appearances. Almost all of the young people who come to us feel marginalised and judged by mainstream schooling. As a result of multiple chronic pressures in their lives, a lack of social supports and a limited ability to self-soothe, most of our students have engaged in recreational drug use and most binge drink every weekend. Many of the students describe themselves as having a history of self harm and several trust us enough to share that they have attempted suicide.

Suicide may not be related to mental illness but to a "same day crisis" (Omar, Grassroots Suicide Prevention Workshop, 2013, also see Shahtahmasebi 2013, 2014 & 2015). When a young person is the victim of bullying, is dumped by their girl or boy friend, when they find themselves without accommodation, they may not see many options for ending their pain. Suicide can seem an attractive option, particularly for young people who have few supports and are still learning healthy ways to self-soothe. If students are depressed or contemplating suicide we are past the point of grassroots prevention. The intervention they need at that point is specialist care. We aim to help students see that they are supported and that they have many choices and skills so that, when a crisis hits, they can soothe themselves in a healthy way, seek appropriate support and find practical solutions.

A recent article by Ralph Brown (2015) found that, by working on young peoples' resilience in everyday challenges, (like getting unexpectedly low marks on a test) we can help prepare them for very big crises. Young people with an internal locus of control, and social and emotional skills showed more resilience even in natural disasters.

Developing a healthy explanatory style was also found to be a major component in resilience. "People with an optimistic explanatory style attribute setbacks to unstable, specific, external causes" (Brown, 2015:119). For instance, if they receive an unexpectedly low mark on a test they might say to themselves: "I didn't do well on the test because I didn't try hard enough." Or "I didn't do well because I'd been away a lot", "I had a cold that day". When working with youth we can model this style for them. "I know you can do better than this mark suggests. It looks like you had an 'off' day". This kind of attribution is more likely to lead to the student trying again (practicing resilience). Students who use a pessimistic explanatory style are likely to attribute their low marks to something internal, stable and global. "I failed because I'm dumb (internal)." "I'll never be good at maths"(stable), "I'm not really good at anything"(global). This explanatory style was associated with lower achievement and more helpless behaviour in the classroom. I often talk to students and say. "If you were talking to a friend, and you wanted them to do well, what would you say to them?" The students often come up with some really helpful attributions. Eg "You can do it. Keep trying". Then I explain that they don't need to feel bad if they don't say encouraging things to themselves but they can choose to pay more attention to the encouraging voice that they would use with a friend and choose to take the helpful advice.

At the Youth Guarantee programme we have a "Student Wellbeing Plan" aimed at preventing students from contemplating suicide. I have used the "Pou Wairua" model (Pou Wairua 2007.tamanui). as the framework for assessing and addressing the students' needs. The model looks at all aspects of our lives as containing elements of thinking / emotion (hinengaro), connecting and relationships (whanau), physicality (tinana) and spirit (wairua). Wairua is stressed in this model because it's the element which influences how all the other elements work together. When wairua is healthy all other aspects will be in balance. The wairua of the centre needs to be of genuine care for the students' total wellbeing. Just "going through the motions" would not be successful in creating an ahu /atmosphere where students feel that staff be accepting of them and help them in any way they can.

The method used in our suicide prevention plan focuses on strengthening connections, providing choice, and teaching practical and self soothing skills.

All of these interventions are underpinned by students developing an internal locus of control. Students are taught that they have choices and that they need to make moral decisions and understand that they themselves are responsible for their life. They learn that, whatever their circumstance, they have choices. Even choosing not to act is a choice. When they find themselves alone and in a crisis it is up to them to reach out to any of the supports they have been introduced to.

A development of internal locus of control could feel oppressive and like an excuse to blame others for their conditions if it is not delivered in a positive and accepting way.

Connect

In the reception of the YMCA Education Centre we have a whakawhanaungatanga (connecting) wall. The wall has student's and staff's first names and the culture they identify with. For instance: James, Māori (Ngati Porou). As well as being a way for the centre to affirm our existing connections to our culture, anyone who comes into the centre can start to make connections with others by finding common identity. The connecting wall is one of the

ways to help students to feel connected to each other so that they may approach other students and staff if they need support. Feeling connected to others is a vital part of our grassroots suicide prevention plan.

We have continued to help students to make a personal connection with helping organisations so that they are able to make informed choices about who they might choose to help them should they need support. When a crisis hits students are more likely to reach out for support if they know who to contact. Even better if they have begun to form a trusting relationship with someone from the agency. All agencies who visit the centre are invited to events where they can mingle with the students, enabling students to ask questions that they wouldn't ask in a group education session. Professionals who have visited the centre have supported staffs efforts to help students learn social and practical skills which can lead to resilience in a crisis or in fact prevent crisis. The Family Planning Association have run sessions around consent, sexuality, and stereotyping as well as contraception. Battered Women's Trust also visited to talk about healthy relationships and what help is available if students find themselves in abusive relationships. An alcohol and other drug counsellor will visit this month to help students look at their substance use. The main objective with all these visits is for young people to start to build trust in helping professionals.

Practical skills and self soothing

This year we spent the majority of youth work hours supporting students around social relationships. Particularly setting up supports for students experiencing domestic violence, setting boundaries and assertiveness with class mates. We hope that this ground work will help students reduce their relationship stress, reduce bullying and increase the likelihood that students will have the skills to support each other in a crisis. Conflicts that have occurred have been on the level of insensitive comments the occasional name calling incident. But with a rolling intake of students we have chosen to keep working on assertiveness, conflict resolution and mediation where appropriate.

We have used a "Response Log" with some students so that they can learn to identify their responses to situations and then to recognise new choices about how they may respond. Several students have mentioned that "nothing helps their anger". The response log can help them to see that it is their behaviour that needs to change rather than focusing on reducing their anger.

Accepting that some difficult feelings are inevitable may help students weather the storm when they are feeling overwhelmed. Rather than simply trying to make the feeling go away students can learn to act in constructive ways despite their difficult feelings.

Helping students identify their values so that they are able to find ways to solve issues and recognise their own strength. For instance, we might comment that a student showed compassion in a social situation or that they were persistent or determined in solving a problem.

This half of the year we focused more on social skills, particularly how to handle conflict and also sexual health. By increasing students' relationship skills we predict that they can reduce the number and severity of relationship crises.

We have continued to help students identify emotions. Giving them techniques to help get through stressful times. Eg helping them identify outcomes that they can control and outcomes that they can't, breaking issues down into what they can work on right now and what they can't. Reinforcing that it's normal to have a few small conflicts and that this is our opportunity to practice assertiveness skills.

A sense of having a connection to trusted service providers may help prevent students from suicide by helping them actively seek effective support.

Choice

A strong internal locus of control is in many ways the opposite of helplessness. We want students to develop a sense that they are the ones in control of their lives. Having met social workers from Battered Women's Trust, an educator from Family Planning, a youth worker from the free youth medical centre and Alcohol and Other Drug counsellors, students have the opportunity to contact these agencies if they are in crisis. Staff constantly point out to students the power they have in their own lives. "These were your choices today. What were the consequences? What other choices might you have? Who might you go to for ideas or support?" We aim to help students see that there are always several options when they are in a crisis.

Wairua/ Ahua

Some of these activities might be seen as just for fun, "extras" that might be first to go when budgets are cut. Truancy is a major reason why our students haven't achieved in mainstream schooling. Our first battle is that we have to get the students to attend to get them to achieve. Having our cultural identity acknowledged, having a say in how the centre is run all help with attendance, feeling that all their needs are seen as important all help students to attend. When students attend we are able to build a trusting relationship with them and we have a chance to help with practical issues like alcohol and drug abuse, conflict at home, homelessness.

The wairua/ ahua (spirit/ attitude/ atmosphere) of the centre is endeavouring to be one of being open to hear students needs and support them wherever they are. To be ready to meet their physical, emotional, family/ connection and spiritual needs. The spirit is perhaps the most important aspect as we are sometimes not able to meet all the students' needs ourselves but if students recognise that we genuinely care they will still come to us in times of need. Students who trust that we have their interests in mind are usually happy for us to introduce them to another service which is able to meet their need for intensive emotional support, help with alcohol and other drugs, coaching around health or violence issues.

Measures of student wellbeing

Wellbeing can be difficult to measure. The suicide prevention plan was written two years ago and I am collating data on indicators of student wellbeing. The indicators I have chosen are: the number of times students state that they are contemplating suicide or attempt suicide, the number of assaults on staff and fights between students and the number of pregnancies.

Fifty students have attended the Youth Guarantee in the first two terms of this year.

No students have reported feeling suicidal since the last article in November of last year. Sadly, one student, who had recently left the Youth Guarantee course, committed suicide last year. The student attended three times and had several weeks of absence before their death. Unfortunately we are unable to find out what might have helped the student as they appeared confident, optimistic and independent. There were no outward signs that the student was contemplating taking their own life when attending at the course.

We used this difficult time at the centre to consolidate the atmosphere, learning and support connections that we had already established with the students. The point of crisis is not the best time to try to teach or introduce new people.

Staff were aware that knowing someone who has committed suicide can sometimes act as a trigger for other suicides, i.e. the precedent effect (Navon, 1981) which is quite different to copycat events. So we applied the central principle of the grassroots approach to prevent suicides that may occur in secret/isolation. In other words, we demystified suicide by talking about it and let students know that they have a better understanding of their peer population and therefore they are as much part of suicide prevention as staff and other professionals, so that they can look out for one another. We reminded students of the helpline numbers and made sure they were in the students' phones "in case they or one of their friends might need them". We discussed with students what normal grief reactions might look and feel like and we gave them the opportunity to write about the ex-classmate and express their thoughts and feelings to staff privately. There was no increase talk of students contemplating suicide after the death of the past student.

Reports of self diagnosed "depression" and "anxiety" are down. Students are quicker to approach staff for support. There has been a shift away from students seeking medication to lift their mood. They are more open to reframing their experience as feeling "sad" "overwhelmed", "having a lot on their mind". We might see this as evidence that students are moving towards an internal locus of control. And an acceptance that some suffering is normal and can be lived through.

There have still been no physical assaults on staff or students at the Education Centre.

Comments from students

In a recent in-house survey of 24 students 14 reported that they had stayed at the Education centre for 6 months or more. That's an increase of 24% from last year. Having a more stable population of students gives us more opportunities to convince students of their own power in their lives, help them with social and emotional skills and increase their connections to therapeutic support.

Further Planned Developments

Research suggests that it's best to be explicit when teaching students about resilience (Brown, 2015). For instance, to point out when students are showing persistence, optimism or compassion so that students can recognise these qualities in themselves and may be able to access them when they are feeling overwhelmed or challenged. We will find ways to weave discussion of values and attributing success and failure in healthy ways so that students are more resilient in the face of both every day and serious knockbacks.

Footnotes/References

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