

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SUICIDE POSTVENTION

“For postvention to work, we must include online media and social networking websites. We cannot reach today’s youth and young adults with old media”

After any death by suspected suicide, there is always the risk of suicide contagion – when the original death influences further suicidal behaviour. If not curtailed, the end result can lead to suicide clusters – when there are more deaths than usual for a particular community within a given timeframe. Clusters are anecdotally believed to be on the increase – thought to be partly contributed to by the “modern threats to suicide contagion” – the new social media.

Just as postvention efforts target real communities, postvention efforts must be made to target new online communities such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and blogs. Cyberspace is the new environment where young people are forming communities.

Online postvention is particularly important when the deceased is aged between 15 and 24 years as data indicate these groups are more active online than other age groups. These age groups are traditionally believed to be more susceptible to suicidal imitation and contagion also.

Being exposed to suicide is a risk factor for further suicidal behaviour. The risk is that so many young people can be exposed to suicide via social media sites, and that those who are already vulnerable to the risk of suicide may start believing suicide is an option for them also.

These social media sites are being turned to by young people as a way of sharing their grief with other young people who are part of their real or online communities. The deceased can be elevated to celebrity status and the risk of contagion can be increased. It is important that postvention work include online postvention.

POSTVENTION ACTIONS

In any online postvention activities, it is important for adults to remember that they are entering a youth community. This is a real opportunity for adults to engage with youth and work together in any postvention activities. There are a number of actions that can be taken to reduce risk within online communities.

FIND ANY ONLINE DISCUSSIONS REGARDING THE DEATHS

Any social media profiles and other online forums need to be explored to determine if there are online

discussions about the recent suicide death(s). There are two types of discussions, public and private discussions.

OPEN PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

There are various ways of searching for online discussions (eg specific online memorials sites set up for the deceased). Using a search engine such as www.google.com or www.pipl.com search by putting in the first and last name of the young person. This will bring up any web pages that may mention the deceased and allow you to read any open public discussions. Check to see whether the deceased used a pseudonym for any of their profiles or blogs as well.

Social mention (<http://www.socialmention.com/>) is another search engine which searches all sources of internet for open discussions. Put in names of the deceased or the name of the school etc to find information.

PRIVATE DISCUSSIONS

Some social media profiles will be private with only 'friends' or identified people able to read the discussions. When discussions are private, it is recommended that the moderator of the site or someone who can access it be identified. Parents may have access to passwords and be able to be moderators of their child's social media profiles. Alternatively, peers /online friends will have access to view the deceased sites. Identify responsible peer leaders who can access these sites and alert adults about any concerning posts. Whilst peers on social networking sites cannot be expected to be experts on suicide prevention, they do read friends updates, blogs, comments and know when something is not right. These peers can act as gatekeepers in suicide prevention and postvention.

NB: this is asking peers to identify concerning posts but not to take action; that is the responsibility of an adult.

POST RESOURCES

If concerning online posts are identified, the next step is to post resources or positive comments on the profile. It is important to promote help seeking behaviour to those who may also be having suicidal thoughts or feelings.

It is important that any resources are:

- Consistent across sites and profiles
- National - as online social communities can extend beyond geographic communities

The suggested posting below can be accompanied by a letter to caregivers and families (See Appendix A).

“With help, this loss of life might have been avoided. The best way to honour (persons name) is to seek help if you or someone you know is struggling. If you’re feeling lost, desperate, or alone – please call”.

- Youthline 0800 376 633, TXT 234 or email talk@youthline.org.nz
- Lifeline 0800 543 354
- the lowdown TXT 5626 or email team@thelowdown.co.nz
- Depression helpline 0800 111 757

The calls and texts are free and confidential and crisis workers are available 24/7 to assist you. To learn more about these services, visit the websites below;

- www.youthline.co.nz
- www.lifeline.co.nz
- www.thelowdown.co.nz
- www.depression.org.nz

Another option is to contact administrators of social networking groups or pages that honour the deceased, so resources can be distributed to hundreds of group members via wall posts, images, discussion board topics or other text. (See Appendix B).

IDENTIFY THOSE AT RISK, SCREEN AND REFER AS NECESSARY

Any postvention response, involves identifying those at risk, screening them for suicide risk and referring them for further assessment and support as necessary.

Sometimes the peers reading the posts can identify the individuals of concern. Have a designated adult (eg school guidance counsellors, youth workers etc) they can pass names to so the adults can follow up with the young people considered to be at risk.

If those posting are considered high risk and identification is not possible, you can contact the administrator of the social networking site. The administrator will then get a counsellor to make contact with the user. You can do this on Facebook or Twitter, by going to:

- Help
- Security
- Sensitive Issues

REFERENCES

1. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and Suicide Prevention Resource Center. 2011. *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*. Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc.
2. CDC: *Social Media Tools Guidelines and Best Practices*.
3. Generation Wired: *Social networking and Engaging Youth in Suicide Prevention*. 23 March 2011. WellAwareWebinar. http://www.wellawaresp.org/pdf/Powerpoint_WA%20GenWired.pdf
4. Larkin, G., and Beautrais, A (draft 2010). *Geospatial Mapping of Suicide Clusters*. Te Pou O Te Whakaaro Nui. The National Centre of Mental Health Research, Information, and Workforce Development. New Zealand.
5. Suicide Prevention Resource Centre : *Lifeline Online Postvention Manual*. <http://www.sprc.org/library/LifelineOnlinePostventionManual.pdf>
6. Texas Suicide Prevention Council (2009). *Coming together to care: A suicide prevention and postvention toolkit for Texas communities*. Mental Health America of Texas.

Appendix A

A letter can be sent to schools/parents etc to help work with the online sites. Such a letter might say:

Dear parents and family members of (e.g., Pohutukawa College).

“Thank you for the chance to work together to help prevent suicide. We are so sorry to hear about the recent losses in your community, school and homes. Whilst there is nothing we can do to erase these tragedies, it is our hope we can help other families in your community from experiencing a similar situation. When someone dies by suicide, the social media profiles of the deceased often become hubs for conversation about the suicide. We would ask that at this time you please monitor and be aware of your child’s online activities and any discussions that may be occurring online.

Messages posted online (e.g., on social media profiles) following a suicide are important as they can have a negative or positive effect and can help to prevent future tragedies. There is substantial evidence that certain messages (e.g., those that glamorise the suicide) and certain information (e.g, details regarding the method of suicide used) may contribute to contagion (ie an increase in suicidal behaviours). While the messages posted online following a suicide should honour the person who died and comfort those left behind, it is important to make sure that those reading about the deceased online (e.g., on MySpace, Facebook or other websites) can understand that there are a number of measures that can be taken to help prevent suicide.

Please have a look at the message which we have crafted for possible use on your child’s social media profiles (eg Facebook, YouTube, MySpace). We recommend working with your child to post these messages online. By doing so, you will be offering help to the people that were affected by these deaths.

“With help, this loss of life might have been avoided. The best way to honour (persons name) is to seek help if you or someone you know is struggling. If you’re feeling lost, desperate, or alone – please call Youthline or Lifeline on 0800YOUTHLINE/0800LIFELINE or text or email talk@youthline.org.nz. The call is free and confidential and crisis workers are available 24/7 to assist you. To learn more about these services, visit:

- www.youthline.co.nz
- www.lifeline.co.nz
- www.thelowdown.co.nz
- www.depression.org.nz

If as a parent you have any concerns about your child you can contact

APPENDIX B

(from Lifeline Manual)

Dear Group or Page Administrator

Thank you for the chance to work together to help prevent suicide. We are so sorry to hear about the recent losses in your community. While there is nothing we can do to erase these tragedies, it is our hope that we can prevent others from experiencing a similar loss.

Messages posted online (e.g., on social media profiles) following a suicide are important as they can have a negative or positive effect and can help to prevent future tragedies. There is substantial evidence that certain messages (e.g., those that glamorize the suicide) and certain information (e.g., details regarding the method of suicide used) may contribute to contagion (ie further suicidal behaviours). While the messages posted online following a suicide should honour the person who died and comfort those left behind, it is important to make sure that those reading about the deceased online understand that there are a number of measures that can be taken to help prevent suicide.

Please have a look at the message below, which could be used on your social networking group or page. By doing so, you will be offering help to the people that were affected by these deaths.

Suicide can best be prevented through treatment and support. You can honour (person's name) by seeking help if you or someone you know is struggling. If you are feeling lost, desperate, or alone- please call:

- Youthline 0800 376 633, TXT 234 or email talk@youthline.org.nz
- Lifeline 0800 543 354
- the lowdown TXT 5626 or email team@thelowdown.co.nz
- Depression helpline 0800 111 757

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- www.lifeline.co.nz
- www.thelowdown.co.nz
- www.depression.org.nz

If you would like to discuss this further or have any concerns about the content on your website/page please contact