

PROTECTIVE FACTORS AGAINST SUICIDE

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Protective factors are things in our lives that can help get us through hard times or things that can act as buffers against suicidal thoughts behaviour (Gutierrez & Osman 2007). Factors identified that may be protective against suicide include individual, family and community based factors. It is important to note that there is relatively little research done on the role of protective factors in reducing suicidal behaviour compared to what is known about risk factors leading to suicidal behaviour. This does not mean that protective factors aren't helpful in reducing risk, just that the focus of research so far has been on predicting risk of suicide.

The current understanding of protective factors builds on what we know about resiliency. Resiliency is the ability to 'bounce back' and positively adapt in difficult times and has been found to be really helpful in helping people cope in difficult situation such as during times of trauma and during stressful periods. So the higher the person's resilience, the better their ability to cope with stress, and vice versa.

Factors that have been suggested as providing protection against suicidal behaviours

There are a number of things that have been thought to be protective factors. Some of these are individual traits and some of these are linked to a person's community and environment. These are explained below.

Individual attributes

- Adaptable temperament – being able to be flexible and change thinking or attitudes.
- Good self-esteem.
- Good problem solving skills (see TWB handout on problem solving skills).
- Good coping skills – which is also linked to problem-solving, but also how the person copes with stress and whether this is in a helpful or skilful way.
- Satisfaction in life.
- Purpose in life – feeling like they have a direction and know what they want from life.

Relationships

- Family support – having a good level of family support is considered a protective factor.
- A good emotional relationship with at least one person in the family – this means being able to talk to or get support from someone when it is needed.
- Stable family routine and activities.
- A connection with culture and an understanding of where they came from.

Community resources and opportunities

- Positive school experiences
- Good social support and social network – knowing that your friends are supportive
- Spiritual faith – this is a strength for some but not for others so needs to be explored for each individual. An understanding of the expectations that a young person feels on them as a result of spiritual faith (and family/culture) is an important factor in terms of understanding how protective this is.

Suggested factors contributing to recovery after a suicide attempt

- Seeking help from professional and peers.
- Practical problem solving skills.
- Thinking positively about their future and surviving the suicide attempt.
- Having a will or desire to live

Assessing protective factors can help in treatment planning by identifying strengths that can be built on. However, it is important to assess and understand how each factor is protective for each individual to truly be able to build make these an effective part of recovery. Working with a young person and their whānau to identify protective factors in their life that can be built on or developed is a vital part of managing risk.

References

- Gutierrez, P M. (2007). Adolescent Suicide: An integrated approach to the assessment of risk and protective factors. Northern Illinois University Press, Illinois.
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