

Guidelines for Community Suicide Awareness Activities

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The World Health Organisation (WHO) has, as one of its key messages, that communities play a crucial role in suicide prevention (WHO, 2014). Communities are pivotal in undertaking active outreach to individuals impacted by suicide, fighting stigma often associated with suicide, supporting those bereaved by suicide and engaging the suicide bereaved with services (WHO, 2014).

Suicide awareness walks, community suicide commemorations and setting aside specific days for suicide awareness (e.g. World Suicide Prevention Day on 10 September annually) are examples of community activities which aim to:

- Increase community awareness and understanding of suicide.
- Provide an opportunity for the suicide bereaved to come together, connect with one another in a supportive way and remember their loved ones.
- Provide information about available supports and services for the suicide bereaved so as to encourage engagement by those in need, in care.
- Connect the community and build both individual and community resilience.

However, community suicide awareness activities also have the potential to inadvertently normalise suicide for people who are already vulnerable. That is, such activities can be linked to “suicide contagion”, the spread of suicidal behaviours through a community, which is why such activities need to be planned very carefully.

Planning community suicide awareness activities (MMHCA, 2012):

- Involve a wide cross section of the community when planning and creating a community suicide awareness activity. Involve community leaders (including cultural and spiritual leaders), experts in the fields of suicide and mental health, local health and mental health professionals and service providers, and those with lived experience (the suicide bereaved) to ensure that various perspectives and experiences are considered.
- Clearly outline your intended goals and consider whether the chosen activity is best suited to achieve these.
- Consider local cultural practices and how best to respect and reflect these in any planned activity to as to maximise community healing and connection.
- Use appropriate and sensitive language when referring to suicide while planning and during any activity (e.g. Beaton et al., 2013).
- Consider everyone who will be exposed to the messages from the activity and how all these people will be appropriately supported during and after the activity.
- Consider how the activity will be publicised and promoted. If media (print or social) is to be used ensure that local services and their contact details are promoted along-side and that help-seeking is actively encouraged.

- Use a responsible and cautious approach when planning any activity including the careful consideration of issues like:
 - the timing of the event both in the context of the community's grief,
 - the intended time of the day for delivery,
 - age appropriateness and
 - manageability of audience size.

Important key messages to be promoted during community suicide awareness activities (WHO, 2014):

- Communities play a key role in suicide prevention
- Suicides are preventable.
- Tough times pass; offering and accepting hope and assistance helps. Suggest alternatives to suicidal behaviour for coping with emotional pain or substance abuse, gambling, legal and relationship problems or indeed any other stressful life events.
- Restricting access to means of suicides works.
- Suicides have a high impact on whanau, friends and communities.
- Breaking the silence around talking about suicide is important. Reducing the stigma often present around suicide helps. Especially emphasising success stories of people recovering from mental illness and overcoming suicidal thoughts feelings or behaviours so as to emphasise the benefits of help-seeking.
- Strengthening connectedness with others protects against suicide; decreasing isolation and loneliness helps.
- Engaging those impacted by suicide with services is a key aspect of suicide prevention.

Ensure the following critical actions are taken in conjunction with any community suicide awareness activities (MMHCA, 2012):

- Link the activity with safe key messages like those listed above; not anger or blame.
- Promote help-seeking:
 - Supports and services for those bereaved by suicide, or those who are otherwise vulnerable, are available throughout the activity.
 - Supports and services and their contact details are promoted at the beginning and at the end of the activity.
- Emphasise protective factors wherever possible. Factors like:
 - easy access to services,
 - a strong sense of cultural and personal identity, purpose and esteem,
 - hope,
 - the acquisition of problem solving skills,
 - strong connectedness and support with family, whanau, hapu and Iwi, and
 - removing access to means of suicide.
- Sufficiently support and prepare anyone delivering a personal story during the activity:
 - this should include familiarity with media guidelines on reporting a suicide and especially avoiding any mention of the details of the place or method of the death,
 - distinguish between the personal accomplishments of the deceased and the final act of suicide,
 - emphasise suicides' painful and permanent consequences,
 - emphasise that suicides are preventable and

- o emphasise help-seeking and linkage with services as desired outcomes.
- Permanent memorials are NOT erected. There is a risk that any permanent memorials are seen as glorifying the deceased; that the deceased is more valued in death than in life. The memorial may also serve as a traumatic reminder or trigger which re-traumatizes the bereaved.

Consider incorporating the following optional aspects to any community suicide awareness activities:

- Reading out a list of those who have died by suicide (with the permission of their families) before the activity begins. This way people will participate together in remembrance of those who have died and in support of those families who have lost loved ones to suicide.
- Coming together at the end of the activity for a shared meal or other life affirming act.
- Inviting local media to write about the activity using safe reporting guidelines (see <http://www.health.govt.nz/publication/reporting-suicide-resource-media>).
- Using T-shirts, wrist bands, head scarves or other remembrance items as fundraisers in support of supports, services and suicide research.

The following links provide examples of suicide awareness walks:

- [http://spangeelong.com/Suicide Awareness Walk.php](http://spangeelong.com/Suicide%20Awareness%20Walk.php) (Suicide awareness walk Geelong).
- <http://www.walkamile.net/> (Walk a mile in my shoes).
- <http://www.sos-walk.org/sos/> (Survivors of Suicide: Out of the darkness community walks).

References

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. *Out of the darkness walks*. (<https://www.afsp.org/out-of-the-darkness-walks>).
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- Flexhaug, M., and Yazganoglu, E. (2008). *Alberta takes action on suicide: Best and promising practices in suicide bereavement support services: A review of the literature*. Alberta Health Services. Healthy Decision, Victoria BC.
- Manitoba Mental Health & Consumer Affairs (MMHCA; 2011). *Suicide Prevention: Guidelines for Public Awareness and Education Activities, October*.
- World Health Organisation (2014). *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative*. WHO Press, Geneva.