



Young people's talk about suicide: Challenging the silence

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Youth Suicide in New Zealand

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of youth suicide amongst OECD countries.

Prevention attempts prioritise:

- ▶ Censorship of media
- ▶ Limiting prevention programmes in schools
- ▶ Identification and referral of mental health problems

Discourses underlying youth suicide prevention strategies in New Zealand

- ▶ Representation of young people as 'the problem.'
- ▶ Need to control at risk populations.
- ▶ Suicide as a mental health problem.
- ▶ Professionals are experts on suicide.

This research

Challenges the mainstream approach to youth suicide:

- ▶ Young people are actively engaged with issues that affect their well-being.
- ▶ Young people have knowledge and ideas about suicide.
- ▶ Young people are capable of resisting adult control.
- ▶ Young people have their own communication networks relating to suicide.

The question: How and where do young people talk about suicide?

Research methodology

- ▶ 'Risky' research and the ethical challenges
- ▶ Focus groups with youth as 'expert informants' on youth culture and youth suicide
- ▶ Participants: 38 aged 15-22 (mainly 16-18).
30 young women and 8 young men
13 New Zealand European, 6 Māori, 8 Pacific Islander and 11 as migrants from various parts of Asia, Britain and South Africa.
- ▶ From Auckland region

Key themes

1. They want to cover it up
2. Adults don't get it
3. Its not safe to tell a professional
4. So we talk to each other
5. Its easier talking online

They want to cover it up

I think they are trying to cover it ...They want our country to look good...Yeah, it's like to make like a perfect society, to maintain a perfect society. (FG5)

We don't talk about suicide and the conversation isn't open for us to have it. I think that's why we have so many problems

Yeah, it didn't work. People talked about it anyway. Everybody knew that it had happened and it's like people talked about it. The only people who didn't talk about it were the [adults].

Adults don't get it

- ▶ I think it's like obviously a lot has changed in the past years. So like with our parents when they were our age there isn't as many things like influencing things, like we obviously have social media. It's huge compared to when they were younger... So I guess it's kind of hard for parents to understand how what their kids will be going through seeing as though they didn't have that
- ▶ I feel like even with parents, how they are like 'Yeah I want my child to be open to me' but when you talk about something they are like 'No. I don't want you to do this'.

Its not safe to tell a professional

- ▶ I think when you go to a counsellor it's like suddenly serious, like you are just going and suddenly speak about your problems. It's not that chilled.... That's why it's easier to talk to friends, because it's just normal to talk to them.
- ▶ So like if you told your counsellor you were going to commit suicide you know that people have to say something. So that is also probably another reason that they are too scared [to talk about suicide], because they don't want to get other people involved.

So we talk to each other

- ▶ Like I know like with me and my friends, our therapy sessions would be like when we're just cruising in car just listening to music and we're just driving and that's not intimidating like we were sitting opposite each other but will get deep with our conversations and they vent and we know that a conversation you should walk away feeling empowered not feeling low kind of thing. [FG9]
- ▶ Yes, I think mainly that there is discussion about suicide amongst young people. It's just that those discussions are never centred on themselves or around people close to them. So it's talked about at a distance, if that makes sense?

Its easier talking online

- ▶ Online connection. It does help...it really does help. Like it's that kind of boost that you actually needed to know that even if they don't know you personally someone out there cares that you're alive.
- ▶ It's definitely easier to say stuff behind a screen and when you can't actually see what the person thinks, like you can't see them reacting to what you're telling them. You can only read their words

But sometimes also difficult

- ▶ And also we've got this real expectation to be happy online and in front of everyone else and if you're not it's not like oh what can we do to help this person, it's what's wrong with this person.
- ▶ Like when I figured it out and shared it to my page I still had people commenting on what I had shared, being like: 'What is he talking about, like what is this?' The thing with Facebook, as instantaneous it is to post stuff it still takes a while to trickle through to everybody and I think that makes it more upsetting for people
- ▶ And sometimes you can't take it all on yourself like sometimes it's just so heavy that you sit there afterwards and you feel...You feel the weight yeah.

Conclusions

- ▶ Adult society seen as being unable or unwilling to engage the issue of suicide.
- ▶ Professional approaches to suicide as a mental health issue and risk management deter young people seeking help for suicide.
- ▶ Young people are actively engaged in talking about suicide in their own networks without adult involvement.
- ▶ An increasing gap in communication between adults (including professionals) and young people.
- ▶ Digital technology allows alternative ways for young people to gain information about suicide from peers and the online communities – but these entail risks as well as benefits.

Some questions?

- ▶ How can we open up conversations about suicide between young people and adults?
- ▶ How can we create partnerships with young people on suicide prevention?
- ▶ How can we shift the discourses and practices on suicide to make help more accessible to young people?