Positive adult relationships reduce adolescent suicide risk

The loss of a young life through suicide is a tragic reality for many families and communities. Each year in the US, one in ten adolescents attempts to end their life. This positions suicide as the second leading cause of death for young people between ten and 19 years of age. These death rates are sadly on the rise and this stark reality makes it urgent to find ways of preventing these deaths. Scientists and public health professionals believe the best way to do this is through understanding the risk and resilience factors associated with suicidal behaviours.

The tragedy of a young person taking their life has wide reverberations and is felt deeply within families, friendship networks, and schools. Mental health difficulties – including experiences of stress, anxiety, and depression – are often an outcome for those who have lost someone close to them through suicide. Confusion and guilt about not having seen the signs of the impending suicide are often difficult feelings and emotions for survivors to resolve. Suicide ‘contagion’, through increased suicidal ideation and the potential for additional suicide attempts, is a concern when a suicide occurs. These societal costs make understanding and preventing adolescent suicide a compelling public health problem.

Lynne Fullerton, Associate Professor at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, and her research collaborators, have invested years studying the factors which predispose adolescents towards suicide. This research provides clear indicators of important points for intervention, most notably, encouraging positive relationships with adults.

One in ten adolescents in the US attempt to end their lives each year, leading to tragedy for these individuals and those around them. Lynne Fullerton, Associate Professor at the University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, and her research collaborators, have invested years studying the factors which predispose adolescents towards suicide. This research provides clear indicators of important points for intervention, most notably, encouraging positive relationships with adults.

Fullerton and her research collaborators have conducted a number of studies published over many years. This research has shown that the lack of positive relationships with adults is one of the key risk factors for suicide among young people. Having positive relationships with adults at home and in the community is associated with a reduced likelihood of teens attempting suicide in the past year.

PROTECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS AT HOME

Fullerton and her research collaborators have conducted a number of studies published over many years. This research was undertaken using anonymous and voluntary responses from 11,887 adolescents selected randomly for participation in the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey, which is administered biannually by the US Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

This research found that close to 10% of the adolescents reported at least one suicide attempt in the previous 12 months; within this, the risk was higher for girls (about 12%) than boys (about 7%). A consistent factor which correlated with lower suicide attempts was the presence of an adult in the home who showed an interest in the adolescent, whether it was about their schoolwork or where the adolescent was and with whom. Additionally, adolescents who felt they had relationships with adults who believed in their ability to succeed and who cared about them were less likely to attempt suicide than adolescents without such positive relationships.

Positive relationships in the home matter, and these relationships are associated with fewer suicide attempts, and lower incidences of ideation and depression among the youth who have this support. Fullerton points out that these home relationships do not have to be ‘perfect’. The presence of a caring, interested, and supportive adult is what makes the difference in the life of an adolescent.

SUPPORT AT SCHOOL

The reality is that not every adolescent is able to draw on supportive relationships at home. Fullerton explains that in these situations, relationships with adults outside the home may bring the greatest mental health benefit in reducing suicide risk, relationships with adults outside the home – at school and within the community – also make a substantial difference. Having an adult who simply takes an interest and pays attention to the teen’s life in relation to the homework they need to do or knowing where they are spending their time after school, vitally contributes to the psychological wellbeing of teens.

Knowing that there is an adult who cares and believes in their success is an incredibly powerful protective factor in enabling teens to find a reason to live.
Behind the Research

Dr Lynne Fullerton and her collaborators study the factors which predispose adolescents towards suicide.

Research Objectives

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People often feel helpless in the face of suicidal adolescents. Adults may not know the impact they can make in the life of a teen by taking an interest, getting involved, and encouraging and supporting the teen's success. Fullerton cites as an important example the Homework Diner programme launched in Albuquerque, which enabled schools to function as communal hubs for students who might otherwise have found themselves isolated or unsupported. Parents, school staff, and adults from the community participated, dinner was provided, and students received help with their homework if they wanted it.

Integrating the resources available, through a multiparametric approach with a clear focus on the identifiable factors that make a difference in suicide prevention, offers hope for adolescents struggling with depression. Fullerton points to multiple programmes which show promise and suggests that these should be evaluated and supported through further research and resourcing. Most importantly, every adult in an adolescent's life can make a difference.

For an adolescent, knowing that there is an adult who cares and believes in their success is an incredibly powerful suicide protective factor and can demonstrate to that young person that they matter.

Fullerton explains that an integrated approach which brings together the various adults in an adolescent's life, at home, school, and in the broader community, is likely to be most effective. In addition, at the simplest level, reducing child hunger through the provision of free meals at school and in the community will make a difference. Risk can be reduced by developing and supporting programmes that foster positive relationships with adults and that encourage adults to understand the life-saving differences they can make.

Every positive adult relationship can make a difference in reducing suicide risk for adolescents.

References


Personal Response

What are the key implications of your research for the design of suicide prevention programmes?

Suicide attempts are less frequent among adolescents who report having good relationships with at least one adult – either in the home, in the community, or at school. The critical element of these relationships seems to be that the adult demonstrates caring by helping the teen (eg, with homework), concern (eg, by knowing where the teen is and whom they are with), and belief that the teen will be successful. These ‘parenting’ tasks can best be shared by the many adults in an adolescent’s life.

In terms of suicide prevention it is important to pay attention to risk factors like school grades and making sure teens have enough to eat, but it is equally important to pay attention to what helps kids be resilient to thoughts of suicide. Programmes that work with adolescents and their parents, focusing on what is hopeful and the teen’s successes, should be evaluated for effectiveness. Culturally relevant programmes appear to have more promise than one-size-fits-all approaches.