

Suicide Prevention- saving one life at a time

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No matter what the suicide rate is, one young life lost is one too many. There is much that we can do as a country to ensure our young people feel safe and wanted. When I work with young people I want them to create futures that they can fall in love with.

Increase belonging

The sense of belonging a person has, is the most powerful antidote to suicide, violence and substance abuse. Strengthening the sense of attachment we all have to family, friends and for young people, significant adults outside the family creates a protective wall against suicide. One of the strongest deterrents for suicide is the sense that there are people who rely on me and need me.

As a society we need to more powerfully let young people know that they are wanted, needed and that their views are important to us.

A recent study of 13-15 year olds in Victoria, found over 40% felt that they did not have anyone who knew them very well – that is, who understood how they thought or felt. Almost a quarter said they had no one to talk to if they were upset, no one they could trust and no one to depend on.

Substance Abuse

Our country is conflicted about alcohol. We publically deplore violent acts but fill our newspapers with advertisements for cheap alcohol.

Alcohol amplifies depression, violence, risk taking and suicidal thinking. We need to become much less tolerant of public drunkenness and a culture that sees alcohol fuelled exploits as heroic.

Job Creation

It is hard for young people to get a sense that they are seriously wanted and seen as a

resource, if there are few real prospects for meaningful employment. The guarantee that every school leaver would have a job or be in training or education seems a distant aspiration.

We live in a time when our investment in the social capital of raising children is declining. The time and energy given to children in their homes is an important aspect of our country's social capital. This form of investment is declining as parents spend less time assisting their children to achieve academic and life outcomes. Reduced family time, reading time, longer working hours and high levels of family break-ups all reduce this form of social capital.

Busier lives come at a great cost and that cost is seen in the most vulnerable in our society- our children.

Reduce Social Toxicity

Children aren't more violent than they used to be but they are more lethal.

In the past five years I've seen a great change in young people. One of those changes has been in the young men I work with work with who murder, assault and inflict severe violence on others. There is always an internal logic to these acts of violence and that usually involves the correction of injustices that have occurred to them. In the past few years grievous envy plays a greater role in many of these young men's explanations for their acts, "They've got it, I can never get it, they don't deserve it, I do".

One response to this is to round up the wagons more tightly, create walled and secure communities, become ever more vigilant and fearful.

Invest in prevention

The overwhelming sense of research is very, very clear prevention pays off. Specifically the

types of programs that have been found to be effective are:

Home visiting for families with young children,
Early educational enrichment through play
Parenting programs
Aggression management in the primary school years
School transition programs both at school entry and between primary and secondary
Resilience Ambassador Programs
Prevention of animal cruelty programs.

These have all been demonstrated to have clear social as well as economic benefits. Most areas of Australia do some of these; too few do all.

Ensure that every child receives affirmation

Rejected children end up with whatever psychological malignancies are on offer. Rejection means shame. Experiencing shame often means depression or aggression. Any society that has not resolved issues of racism will be plagued by violence.

Reduce Economic Inequality- the gap between rich and poor

In Australia (4) the income of the top 10% is at least 4 times that of the bottom 10%. It is critical that we do not lose sight of the needs of indigenous Australians. We recently completed a resilience study of young indigenous Australians only to find that their greatest fear was dying young. This is perhaps not surprising when the life expectancy of indigenous Australians is lower than it was for white Australians in 1900.

While re-dressing economic imbalance we should not become defined by economics. We are society not a marketplace. We need to reclaim our rights as citizens and not allow ourselves to be defined as customers. Customers have needs, citizens have power.

Protect childhood

There is an often-misquoted statement that it takes a village to raise a child. In fact the original statement is that "It takes a *whole* village to raise a child". I don't think we have a whole village. In

fact I think we have a society that treats childhood as if it an ailment to be remedied- ideally as quickly as possible.

Raising a child is a social matter- We need to support people are doing the work of protecting childhood and to rail against those that would turn them into mini-adults. We also need to have permanent relationships with families who hurt children.

Base social policy on human rights

As a country we need to think about the rights that we hold inviolable. A public debate around this issue is greatly needed in Australia

Make better use of the fact that we are spiritual beings

There is a great yearning among many young people for a "scale of the gods" of something to believe in beyond themselves.

Australian researcher Jim Barber compared youth suicide rates with adolescent self-esteem, school and social adjustment in seven countries. He found that the higher the level of self-esteem and adjustment, the higher the male suicide rate.

Richard Ekersley examined associations between youth suicide rates in up to 21 developed nations and a wide range of social, economic and cultural characteristics, and found that male suicide rates were highest in the most individualistic countries. The more personal freedom and control over their lives young people felt they had, for example, the higher the suicide rate.

We need to have more than ourselves to believe in and this is particularly the case for young men,

Teach resilience

Resilience is a learnable skill. It improves people's lives, gives them meaning and benefits the lives of those around them. We need young people to become resilience ambassadors for their peers and their communities. Studies show that these types of interventions increase resilience and reduce suicide and self-harm.

A Values based approach to engaging suicidal young people

Underlying Values	Dominant Emotion	Common Behaviours	Person's metaphors	Therapist's Metaphors
I want to be free	Anger Resentment Sadness Insecurity	Rebellion Limit testing Truancy Drug use	Unfairness Injustice "They never listen"	Public relations Righting wrongs Hidden sides Independence vs. reaction Freedom fighters
I want to be loved	Desire Safety trust	Suicidal behaviour Self harm School refusal Psycho-somatic disorders Food hoarding Stealing at home Sibling rivalry Depression Boasting	Insufficiency Inadequacy Predictable bleakness of the future	Fair play Accuracy of predictions Capacity for self love and for showing love to others
I want power	Fear of loss	Violence Delinquency Theft Criminal acts Bullying Graffiti	Necessity of action Entitlement	Ability and competence
I want understanding	Shame	Abuse Incest	Secrecy Isolation Irreparability	Protection then, compassion (to self) don't trust too soon
I want certainty	Despair Resignation	Eating disorders Thought disorder Anxiety Depression	Insatiable need for reassurance Threats Uniqueness	Trust in feelings Difference made by knowing