Preventing suicide

A community engagement toolkit

World Health Organization

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Foreword

Suicides take a high toll. Over 800 000 people die by suicide every year and it is the second leading cause of death in 15-29-year-olds. There are indications that for each adult who dies of suicide there may be more than 20 others attempting suicide. The impact on families, friends and communities is devastating and far-reaching, even long after persons dear to them have taken their own lives. Social, psychological, cultural and other factors can interact to lead a person to suicidal behaviour and the stigma attached to suicide means that many people feel unable to seek help. Most suicides occur in low- and middle-income countries where resources and services, if they do exist, are often scarce and limited for early identification, treatment and support of people in need. These striking facts and the lack of implemented timely interventions make suicide a serious global public health problem that needs to be tackled urgently.

Communities can play a critical role in suicide prevention. They can provide social support to vulnerable individuals and engage in follow-up care, fight stigma and support those bereaved by suicide. They can help give individuals a sense of belonging and a feeling of connectedness by being part of a community. Lastly, communities can also implement specific suicide prevention strategies relevant to their situation.

Facilitating community engagement in suicide prevention is an important task. Whereas governments need to take a lead in developing and implementing comprehensive multisectoral strategies for suicide prevention, communities can incorporate and enhance these efforts by considering their local community needs, priorities and circumstances.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada launched the grassroots initiative #308conversations by inviting each of Canada's 308 Members of Parliament and other community leaders to hold a conversation in their community about suicide prevention. The initiative represents a participatory approach to connecting communities, sharing best practices, identifying challenges, and taking meaningful action to reduce suicide and the impact of suicidal behaviours in Canada. Interested community members, people with lived experience and stakeholders share what is working and identify gaps in access, treatment and support.

The World Health Organization has worked collaboratively with the Mental Health Commission of Canada to adapt this participatory approach for global use. This toolkit is a step-by-step guide for communities to engage in suicide prevention activities, take ownership of the process and keep efforts sustained. The toolkit is not a manual for initiating specific interventions; rather, it describes an active and participatory bottom-up process by which communities identify, prioritize and implement activities that are important and appropriate to their local context and that can influence and shape policy and services.

We hope that the community engagement toolkit will be used in many countries and contexts. Together, we are working towards the ultimate goal of reducing suicide. The Member States of the World Health Organization have committed themselves in the Mental Health Action Plan 2013-2020 to work towards the global target of reducing the suicide rate in countries by 10% by 2020. The suicide rate is among the agreed indicators for the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals health target 3.4, namely "by 2030 reduce by one third premature mortality from noncommunicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being". This target is unlikely to be achieved unless communities are actively engaged in efforts for suicide prevention.

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