

A New Focus for Suicide Prevention



Why SANE is carrying out this research

In the UK alone, there are still over 5,000 suicides each year, and many, many more attempts. Because it is often the young who kill themselves, this means that every year, we lose well over 100,000 life years to suicide. The number of people in this country affected by the suicide of someone grows every year; it is estimated that up to an average of 28 people suffer the consequences of each suicide. Still more people are left reeling from the effects of suicide attempts, which can have long-standing and severe consequences for both the mental and physical health of the person who made the attempt and their close family and friends.

Finding a new focus for suicide prevention

The people who stand the most chance of preventing suicides are ordinary people, the friends, colleagues, neighbours and family members of those whose lives are at risk. Only one in four people who kill themselves are in contact with the mental health services, and that means that health care professionals can do very little for the majority of people who contemplate suicide.

Despite this known fact, the role of ordinary members of the community in suicide prevention is mostly left unrecognised and unsupported. Most suicide research is geared to help *professionals* to identify those at risk and to respond, while the evidence base to assist *friends and family* as they struggle to spot signs of danger and help is very thin indeed.

This research project aims to make a sizeable contribution to that evidence base and enable a much larger proportion of the community to take part in preventing suicides than is possible at present. We're also hoping that our associated campaigning efforts will help to get recognition for the contribution family and friends are already making in supporting those who are in danger of suicide and have perhaps already attempted it. And if we are successful, health care professionals will also benefit from the increased understanding of the process of suicide; despite all the research to date, predicting a suicide is still incredibly difficult and many care providers are not able to respond appropriately when a risk is identified.

Understanding suicide from a first-person perspective

In order to carry out this study we will be using a qualitative method called 'grounded theory', which hasn't been used much in suicide research (although you might want to take a look at the work of one of our advisors [Christabel Owens](#)). Our interpretation of the method is to start with the freely told stories of our participants without much interference from the researchers, and to learn from these to come up with further, more specific questions. This means talking to each participant several times, and always also going back to them with our interpretations of their words and our theories. In a sense this process is the opposite of the standard scientific research project, in which you start with a theory and a hypothesis you are trying to support.

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In a grounded theory study, you try to stay as theory-free as possible until you've actually talked with your participants. That is how you end up with a theory that is 'grounded' in the experiences of your participants.

Using our results to help everyone to help prevent suicide

We'll use our website to communicate our findings to as wide an audience as possible, so that more people can recognise when someone might be suicidal and do something to help. Together with people who have been suicidal, families bereaved by suicide and support professionals, we will develop an online report that will serve as a source of information on suicide prevention for years to come. This online resource will be supplemented by information leaflets distributed through GP surgeries.

Our findings will also be used to make our own services better, and improve the way our helpline and email volunteers recognise and respond to suicidal distress.

The results will inform our campaigning and media activities, as we work towards better recognition of and support for family members and friends when they try to prevent suicides, and to raise awareness about suicide among the general public. So, for example, we will write about our research to the relevant policymakers and inform journalists who are writing about suicide in the media.

In addition, we'll write articles for publication in academic journals and speak about our research at conferences.

Taking part in A New Focus for Suicide Prevention

We will be talking to people who have lost a close friend or relative through suicide, and to people who have attempted suicide themselves and their close friends or relatives.

If you are interested in taking part, all we need is that you:

- Currently live in the UK
- Are 16 years of age or over, OR are able to participate with the consent of your parent or guardian. AND...
- Have EITHER lost someone close you to suicide within the last three years. OR...
- Have attempted suicide and have a close friend or a family member who lived through the experience with you and is willing to participate in the research with you. OR...
- Are a close friend or a family member of someone who has attempted suicide in the last three years and who is willing to participate in the research with you.

If you have any questions or would like to talk to us about this project, you can contact members of the research team on 020 7422 5537/5575. Alternatively, you can email us:

SuicidePreventionStudy@sane.org.uk

or write to us at New Focus for Suicide Prevention, Research Department, SANE.
Please use the London address below.