

Q & A from Webinar #10:

The 5 Things we wish ALL Teachers knew about ... How to welcome back a student who experienced suicidality

We had such a lively discussion post-webinar this time that not all of the questions got answered! Here they are transcribed for you along with answers for each one. If you have further questions, please email Robert at: robert@suicideinfo.ca

1. What is the universal definition of “Suicide Prevention” or how does Canada define it?

The range of efforts and resources that those in mental health make available to enhance someone’s safety from suicidal behaviour is generally how suicide prevention is defined. Here at the Centre for Suicide Prevention we believe that prevention is the only solution to suicide. We teach prevention by educating people with the information, knowledge and skills necessary to respond to the risk of suicide. Suicide Prevention is the term typically used to describe Suicide PIP or Prevention, Intervention and Postvention. Prevention in and of itself, ideally, would obviate the need to have the subsequent stages in suicide awareness, intervention and postvention, in place. Sadly, this has not been achieved as yet but it is a goal.

2. What mechanisms that work that stop the causation of suicidality? The focus is on the person who has attempted not the cause?

We don’t want to focus on the behaviours. We want to focus on the feelings that underlie the behaviours. Each person is unique. We have to understand the specifics of what has caused this person to be suicidal. To respond in a “generic” way is not truly addressing the individual’s needs.

3. From working within an Aboriginal context, where suicide is an epidemic, are there any specific suggestions with working with that population? 8. What oppression is the driver re: Aboriginal people –Do we work on stopping the oppression or focus on the person to “get used” to oppression?

In addition to the connections that you might have to the individual who has attempted suicide, whether as teacher-student or some other relationship, there are added elements and additional challenges that you have to consider should the child be of aboriginal origin.

You must try and understand the historical context of colonialism in relation to the present-day struggles of Aboriginals and Aboriginal youth to fully appreciate why suicide is so prevalent in some of their communities. Widespread feelings of despair and hopelessness caused by colonial factors such as the residential school period policy and perpetuated by intergenerational trauma (where these collective, dysfunctional scars do not heal and persist, passing on from one generation to the next) are some underlying reasons why epidemics can take hold in some aboriginal communities. Add to this the incredible stigma that suicide has in

some areas, where it can be scarcely mentioned or acknowledged, yet it is ongoing and there is no help available for suicidality. Some youth may come to view suicide as a viable and “normal” solution to their situation. This further creates a potential for contagion and epidemic. And of course, there are many Aboriginal communities where these problems do not occur so we have to be cognizant of this as well. Thus, dealing with a suicidal Aboriginal youth individually can be incredibly complex.

The short answer is that you must be mindful of the context and bring this empathy and understanding into any discussion with an Aboriginal youth regarding their attempted suicide.

4. A different question.. I hear that there are different ways to “co commit suicide” do you have any terms?

I believe you are asking if there are other preferred ways to describe someone “committing suicide” other than by using this phrase. Right? Well, here at CSP we encourage the use of direct, yet neutral, language such as “dying by suicide”, “death by suicide” or “suicide” to describe the act. “Committed” as a word has certain negative, even criminal, connotations which reflect back to a time when suicide was a crime.

5. How soon after the attempt should we expect the student to return to school? IS there such a thing as too soon?

The important thing to keep in mind is that we don’t get to decide when a student returns. This is a decision made by the student and his or her parents or guardians. We hope we might be offered an opportunity for input such as if we think it might be too early or that maybe they can start off on half-days or something but ultimately each child is different and will return on their own timetable.

6. What would you suggest when information regarding suicide is treated as confidential and teachers are not kept in the loop?

The reality is school and parents must meet to establish what level of safety needs to be put into place and who in the school needs to know about the suicide attempt to ensure their continued safety.