

Media release
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‘Suicide is not a selfish act’ say survivors who have attempted to take their own life – new research

A study of Australians who have attempted suicide has found many made the attempt feeling they were ‘a burden’ and believed their family and friends would be ‘better off’ without them.

The research, by national mental health charity SANE Australia and the University of New England, found that a common feeling among people at the time of the attempt was of hopelessness and that their ‘mental pain’ would never end.

‘We interviewed 31 people from across Australia – from both city and regional areas – who had made an attempt on their life, and asked them to tell us about their experience, what support was available to them, whether they had talked with family and friends about the attempt and also what helped or hindered recovery,’ explains SANE Australia’s Suicide Prevention Manager, Sarah Coker.

‘This type of research is lacking in Australia,’ Ms Coker says. ‘Many studies have focused on prevention or clinical and expert opinion, neglecting the personal and lived experience of people who have survived a suicide attempt.’

‘Given that suicidal ideation and prior suicide attempts are common predictors of increased risk, it is important to understand the experiences of people who have attempted suicide and what factors may help the recovery process,’ explains Associate Professor Myfanwy Maple, from the University of New England’s School of Health.

The majority of the study’s participants (87%) reported having been diagnosed with at least one mental illness. Fifteen people reported one or more suicide attempts and 11 reported multiple suicide attempts across the lifespan.

Triggers for the attempt included symptoms of mental illness, a lack of professional support, being bereaved by suicide, and drug and alcohol use.

Several participants reported that at the time of their attempt they had ‘an intense emotional pain’ that they wanted to stop. Others felt they were ‘trapped, with no way out’ or ‘worthless’.

‘Judgemental attitudes and stigma were also commonly mentioned, with several people citing a ‘need to end the suffering’ that they were causing others. In a way their suicide attempt was not a selfish act, but rather a distorted belief that by ending their life, the person would improve the situation for those they cared about,’ Ms Coker says.

The study found that access to effective treatment and developing a trusted relationship with a health professional, such as a psychiatrist, is crucial in helping people recover. Support and understanding from family and friends and learning ways to cope, is also very important.

‘People who have survived a suicide attempt are extremely vulnerable and unfortunately they can encounter negative, dismissive or discriminating attitudes, which can make them feel they are not deserving of help.

‘The less judgemental we are about people who attempt suicide the more likely that people who are feeling suicidal will seek help,’ says SANE’s Suicide Prevention Manager.

SANE Australia

A national charity helping all Australians affected by mental illness lead a better life.

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The research is being presented by SANE Australia at the 2014 National Suicide Prevention Conference currently underway in Perth. <http://suicidepreventionaust.org/conferences/>

Case study

Terry * lives in a regional city in NSW. He has attempted suicide twice. On both occasions he described himself as 'mentally unwell'. After his first attempt, Terry was admitted to the emergency department of a large regional hospital. He saw a psychiatrist for the purpose of discharge only and was given no referral or information about follow-up. At the time Terry said he had severe depression and was working in a 'very difficult job, highly paid, but with very difficult staff and clients.' He says he sought support from his manager but was not offered any help.

Terry's second suicide attempt was around the time he went to detox for drug and alcohol addiction. At no time during his treatment were his mental health problems addressed. Terry has never spoken about his struggles with his family. He says he took part in the research because he 'hopes it might help others'. These days Terry says he has excellent support from his psychiatrist who 'made me a lot stronger and more stable.' 'With the help of my psychiatrist I'm working this out', he adds.

* not his real name

ATTN SUB EDITORS/PRODUCERS

Because vulnerable people can be adversely affected by suicide stories and people are more likely to seek help when appropriate services are included, we ask you to provide the following information:

- **Lifeline** www.lifeline.org.au/Get-Help/
- **Suicide Call Back Service** www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au
- **SANE Australia Helpline** 1800 18 SANE (7263) or www.sane.org

Additional Information

The latest ABS report on Causes of Death in Australia reveals more than 2,500 people died by suicide in 2012 – the highest number for the past ten years. Every one of these deaths is a tragedy for the person involved and their family and friends.

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australians aged 15-44, with the highest rate among middle-aged men. Suicide among teenage girls (aged 15-19) increased by 63% from 2011 to 2012: from 36 deaths to 59. It is estimated that every day over 1,000 Australians experience suicidal thoughts. These figures make a compelling case for renewed action on suicide prevention.

SANE Australia has called on the Australian and State Governments to establish a national goal to halve the suicide rate in ten years, and make a concerted effort to achieve it as a matter of urgency. There is no simple solution to suicide prevention. According to SANE Australia CEO Jack Heath, we need a range of coordinated services with support from governments to build the most effective national strategy.

Suicide prevention is a key focus of SANE Australia. Federal Government support has enabled SANE to train mental health professionals to improve recognition and response to clients at risk of suicide; to conduct research with people who have attempted suicide; and to work with media to reduce stigma so that people can get the help they need early on. SANE Australia also runs the SANE Helpline, which has directly saved lives. SANE Helpline is funded through individual donations.