Understanding families and suicide risk

Understanding families and suicide risk (Fitzgerald et al., 2010) provides important information about concepts of family and family resilience in response to suicide risk. This information is useful for developing suicide prevention strategies that focus on family intervention. The report will be of interest to the spectrum of practitioners, researchers, service and health information providers and lay people who are interested in families, suicide prevention and building family resilience.

What is contained in Understanding families and suicide risk?
The study investigates concepts of family and family resilience in the context of suicide risk. Interviews were undertaken with families with experience of suicide behaviour and practitioners who work closely with families at risk. Interviews explored concepts of what it means to be a family, family resilience and the role of family strengths in situations when a young person is at risk.

Why collect this information?
In New Zealand, approximately 19 per cent of female secondary school students and 9 per cent of male students report thinking seriously about suicide during a period of 12 months (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2008). Family resilience concepts such as flexibility to change, family cohesion, communication and family self-concept (see Patterson, 2002) may mitigate suicide risk. However, existing research has focused on risk factors (e.g. Fergusson et al., 2003), rather than the factors that help families to cope when a young person is at risk of suicide (Beautrais et al., 2006). To inform family-focused suicide prevention, investigations of family strengths and family resilience in the context of suicide risk are needed.

Who undertook this study?
The study was undertaken by The Psychology Centre, a Hamilton service specialising in psychological assessment and treatment, psychologist training and research. The study was completed as part of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2008–2012 and funded by the Ministry of Health through Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui: The National Centre of Mental Health Research, Information and Workforce Development.

What methodology was used?
The study was primarily qualitative in nature, drawing information from families that had experienced a suicide attempt or a completed suicide, or that included a young person with a mental health concern. Semi-structured interviews explored concepts of family, family strengths and coping, and the role of family strengths in times of suicide risk. Mental health practitioners were also interviewed to gather supplementary information on the role of family strengths in mitigating suicide risk. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, a form of thematic analysis, was used to identify key themes from the interview discussions.
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What were the findings of the study?
Families and practitioners identified communication, caring and an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness as some of the key family strengths. These and other strengths were often person and context specific and were dynamic in nature. Family relationships were conceptualised as the shared bonds that allow members to care and support each other, rather than biological or legally-defined groupings. Strong family bonds did not appear to be sufficient to mitigate suicide risk.

Many families could identify strengths that they aimed for, but noted that they often struggled to achieve these consistently. In particular, effective communication was repeatedly reported as a key strength to support successful family functioning in times of crisis (prevention and postvention).

Implications for family interventions include:
- developing and fostering family communication skills
- developing and fostering mutual family support and caring, possibly through shared activities
- assisting high-risk families to identify their own strengths and acceptance of others
- developing and fostering a healthy balance between individual autonomy and accountability
- improving family access to information that can support risk identification.

The results of the study suggest that social and health providers can strengthen family resilience against suicide risk by helping family members enhance their communication skills, improving access to information on mental health and suicide risk, supporting problem solving and emphasising the importance of shared activities for families.

What is the next step for Understanding families and suicide risk?
The full report of this study will be made available online on the Suicide Prevention Information New Zealand (SPINZ) and Te Pou websites. The research team will present their findings at conferences for mental health practitioners and for people involved in suicide prevention. A journal article will be developed so that the study contributes to the body of academic knowledge on families, suicide prevention and resilience.

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For the most up-to-date information on this project, please visit www.tepou.co.nz.

References