

Inquiry into Suicide Prevention

Ymchwiliad i Atal Hunanladdiad

Ymateb gan Unigolyn

Response from An Individual

Suicide Prevention Submission

1. This submission is in response to the call for evidence by the Health, Social Care, and Sports Committee on the topic of Suicide Prevention. It is a personal account of my own experience with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Although my experiences will likely differ in terms of cause and effect from others, I still feel this could be helpful in the committees work.
2. I am a 33 year old male, who lives in [REDACTED]. I dropped out of college, but later went on to achieve my BA and MA. I have worked several minimum wage jobs, but also held public office in local government between 2012-2017. I now work as a research support worker in [REDACTED] University.
3. My conclusion in this submission is that, while I agree that support services that focus considerably on talking therapies need to be invested in and maintained, more needs to be done to recognise the potential for social capital building work in communities to improve individual and community mental health. Also, work needs to be done to ensure that early warning signs are identified – with support offered and taken up as early as possible – and that opportunities for meaningful employment or volunteering are widened.

Home and School

4. This section is about my school life, and while the bullying I mentioned started as early as primary school – much of what follows arose during secondary and further education.
5. I suffered from bullying throughout much of my statutory education, and towards the end of this period my parents' marriage was breaking down. School became a refuge from home, and home became a refuge from school. Neither allowed me to feel fully relaxed, and as a result I began to find my own ways of escape. During some lessons in school I would go to the library and, if asked, say I had permission to do work there. In other lessons where the teacher was more lenient, I would spend much of my time just chatting to friends and not doing much work.
6. This resulted in me having to drop a GCSE as I was continually missing classes, and it also led to me getting a far lower grade than I could have received in another subject. In another subject, though I did eventually walk out with a good grade, I was reluctant to speak to my teacher about the fact I was struggling at times because I feared being moved down a set and away from those I felt somewhat comfortable with.
7. I should say that relevant teachers did try to discuss with me what was going on, but I would deliberately refuse to give them more information than I needed to. In hindsight I feel that perhaps I should have spoken to someone at this point, but at the time I feared the outcome

- especially as the school would've been unlikely to stop the bullying, and they had no power to fix my parents' marriage (or speed up their divorce!).
8. After leaving school I went to college, electing to go to a nearby college rather than my nearest college. It wasn't long after I started that I regretted this decision, as I felt isolated and my confidence made it very difficult for me to make new friends. I did not make friends in the subjects I had taken and, similar to my behaviour in school, I started to miss lessons in order to spend more time with the few friends I did manage to make. However, missing lessons had its consequences and eventually I was basically told that due to my attendance I would need to drop the subject. This led to me dropping out of college altogether.
 9. Before all this happened, one teacher did suggest I speak to someone about the problems I was having although I did not take up this opportunity. Also during this time, my older sister moved away for university which left me with my parents and their failing marriage at home.

Education to Employment

10. After leaving college I tried to find work, although by this point my confidence had plummeted further and I found it difficult to do. I didn't engage with the Jobcentre at first, because of my increasing anxiety that was becoming overpowering and stopped me from either walking through their doors or phoning. This anxiety also stopped me from getting driving lessons, which didn't help my job prospects.
11. I think it was during this time that I had some thoughts about suicide, but it wasn't serious or lingering. At the time I put it down to just having a bad day and overthinking my situation. My parents also divorced during this time, which led to a complete breakdown in the relationship between myself and my father – we wouldn't talk for years afterwards.
12. Eventually, I managed to get job working at a local bar and restaurant. Overall my time was challenging but I didn't have many problems, aside from several incidents where I would feel anxious about making sure I was doing everything right when it was busy. Later on however, hours became infrequent and as I worried about my finances more I felt myself becoming more withdrawn, anxious, and depressed. This led to me leaving the job.

Depression

13. After leaving that job, my mental state deteriorated at an increased pace. My sleeping patterns changed as I started to stay awake later at night (into the early hours of the morning) and spent more time sleeping during the day. I started speaking to people online more, especially women, and avoided many social encounters day to day.
14. My eating habits also changed, for a while I hardly ate but then afterwards I just ate junk food rather than anything healthy. Coupled with lower activity levels, I quickly put on weight – which further hit my confidence.
15. I did begin to engage more with the Jobcentre, as since the divorce my mother was in a weakened financial position which made me feel that I should be helping her out more and contributing. However, despite some good people working at the Jobcentre, my anxiety was so bad that I would constantly feel as though they were looking down at me, judging me, and looking at me as though I was purposely unemployed. The money helped, but I did not find going to the Jobcentre regularly as being helpful – and in fact felt as though it harmed more.

16. It was during this time that I started to think more about where my life was heading, whether I had failed completely, if there was any chance of being able to do something again, and the burden I was becoming to those around me. I started asking myself these questions every day, especially during the night, and would often come to the conclusion that I was a failure and a burden, and that those around me would be better off without me around.
17. The longer this went on, the more serious I got about thinking about suicide and considered how I would actually do it. I did not go through with any of my thoughts, something I attribute to the reassurance by some of those close around me – including my mother, sister, and friends – but these thoughts did not go away.
18. I started to escape more from reality by concentrating on writing short stories, attempting writing a novel, all of which took place in a completely fictional location or in a historical setting. In some of the characters I was able to address some of the issues I was facing, or imagine some of the qualities I would have loved to possess.

Getting Better

19. Things started to change for me when my sister suggested that I consider applying to go to university, using some of the knowledge I had gained during researching for my creative endeavours. Although I didn't expect anything to come out of it, I reached out to a nearby university and had a discussion with a lecturer there.
20. Later that year I formally applied to university and was successful. Over the next three years, I gained my BA, but then the recession hit and I couldn't find work when I left. This hit the confidence I had developed over the years in university, but I got involved with local politics due to a developing interest in some of the issues that I had experienced.
21. My mother then suggested that I go back to university to undertake postgraduate study, which she would fund. I decided to do this, and a year later I received my MA and was volunteering in the community. This gave me opportunities to frequently speak to people, do something I had an interest in, feel as though I was contributing, and that I wasn't useless or pathetic.
22. This volunteering work also helped me get some direction in my life overall, and I decided that I wanted to seek election to public office – which I achieved in 2012. During my time in office I spoke and wrote publicly about my battles with depression, feeling safe to do so due to others being open about the challenges they had faced. I hoped that by speaking about these things (as a relatively young man in a high profile position), I could help encourage others to speak about what they're going through as well. In fact, for several days after the article was published I had individuals speaking to me on the bus, in work, and even in a few shops about it.
23. Although I would later lose out narrowly in the 2017 elections, I managed to find work again within a few months and am also working with my partner to develop a project based on our mutual interests. At times, I did once again have some dark thoughts at times – with the main triggers being; when my bank balance was low and bills were due, something broke unexpectedly in the house, or after receiving several job rejection letters. These wouldn't last long and are easier to cope with.
24. Getting into a serious relationship, after various failed relationships or associations, has also helped considerably – especially as she challenged me to face some of my problems and

helped me become a healthier person overall. We are now expecting our first child, so there's plenty to be positive about, look forward to, and be proud about.

Conclusions

25. Writing all of this has been easier than I thought it would, but is only a rough outline of my experiences and not the full extent of everything that contributed to my depression, suicidal thoughts, and recovery.
26. However I feel that there was a clear pattern emerging long before I had suicidal thoughts, one that – in my opinion – shows that while early identification and engagement is crucial, not everyone is going to feel confident enough to seek professional or semi-professional help. Creating a culture where people feel at ease talking about concerns or pressures is vital.
27. Throughout, family, friends and most recently my partner, have all played an enormous role in keeping me positive and giving me something to live for. Even though I have felt like a burden to them, just knowing how my death could affect them pulled me back from the brink several times.
28. Unemployment and the grinding sense of failure is deadly, especially for men who are still believe they are expected to be providers or that success is linked heavily with attraction. Working or otherwise contributing through volunteering was very helpful in my case, although bad employment (insecure, unappreciated, low valued) can be almost as bad as unemployment.
29. I have no knowledge of support in place for those suffering from depression and having suicidal thoughts, but I think that if someone does take the step in actually reaching out for them – they need it to be appropriate, considerate, and delivered in a timely manner. Attention also needs to take into account the wider network of support that can exist within the community and how community development (through social capital building) can help to improve community mental health while reducing demand on more formal structures.
30. I think that building more opportunities to volunteer in communities, more community based activities and participatory organisations, as well as opening up the public sector to increased volunteerism (carefully managed so that public bodies don't see volunteers as a cheaper alternative to properly employed staff) would be helpful.
31. If there is anything that you want to ask me about in connection with any of the above, please feel free to do so.