



Fact sheet 15

What communities can do to prevent suicide

Prevention of suicide in Australia needs to be a shared responsibility involving all sectors, organisations and communities.

This fact sheet provides a brief overview of the strategies for building community capacity, with a focus on suicide prevention.

The importance of building strong communities to prevent suicide

A sense of belonging and being connected to and supported by a community is an important protective factor to prevent suicide. Local community programs, projects and activities that aim to build individual and community capacity and resilience can significantly influence the prevention of suicide and suicidal behaviours.

Local communities, and the individuals, families and groups they comprise, have needs that are best met at the local level through community action. This includes needs in relation to preventing suicide. It makes excellent sense to invest in and support communities so they have the capacity and desire to work together to shape their own future. This is called community capacity-building. Community capacity is the ability of communities, organisations, groups and individuals (collectively) to build their structures, systems, people and skills so that they are better able to work towards and achieve their shared objectives.

Communities can contribute to the ways that people build and maintain their personal resilience that assists them to weather difficult times. They can do this by:

- providing safe and secure environments;
- encouraging and supporting positive and supportive relationships within families, friends, neighbourhoods, and social and community groups;
- promoting and supporting the coordination of service delivery by local providers;
- having a coordinated crisis response plan and capability that is activated during times of adversity;
- ensuring access to general practitioners, mental health workers, hospital emergency personnel and professional carers who are trained and sensitive to the needs of people feeling suicidal; and/or

- provision of support through existing facilities that people use such as sporting clubs, schools, self-help groups, and religious and community organisations.

Community suicide prevention strategies

Community-based suicide prevention activities, projects and programs are characterised by:

- a shared understanding of the problem;
- a shared sense of responsibility;
- a diversity of approaches;
- culturally appropriate responses; and
- a do no harm philosophy.

It is important to look at the evidence of what works before setting up any project relating to suicide prevention, to ensure that no harm is done. The six strategies defined below can be used as a guide in developing local community capacity to support suicide prevention.

1. Know the local community; its needs, structures and history

It is important to capture and use local knowledge and information that goes beyond normal statistical data. Local information can be gathered through community forums, focus groups, surveys, and through public discussions in the local media.

2. Understand the local issues that might affect the incidence of suicide

Suicide prevention programs may be in response to community issues arising from:

- particular events such as drought or economic hardship;
- an issue that is confined to a specific group or need. For example, the death of someone in the community may suggest that there is a general lack of understanding and sensitivity to suicide which requires a planned, whole-of-community awareness-raising and education program; or
- an increased incidence of bullying in schools (a known risk factor in youth suicide). A community-based response plan might include a series of anti-bullying and resilience-building programs conducted in all local schools.



3. Increase awareness of suicide prevention

Raising community awareness of suicide prevention creates a culture of shared responsibility in providing locally-based and locally-owned solutions and will contribute to the capacity of a community to protect and support all of its members. Awareness-raising can be focused on broad issues related to suicide and suicide prevention, such as increasing a community's understanding of the effect that adverse life events may have on individual health and wellbeing, through local education and health promotion programs in schools, service and sports clubs and by holding public forums.

Strategies should also be put in place to support the development of a coordinated and shared response to issues by community members and service providers. For example, community forums could be used to engage the support and participation of local services and individuals into a local coordinated response for people bereaved by suicide.

4. Develop and maintain local networks

Networks play an important role in building and maintaining community capacity. They provide a platform for information sharing, planning, advocating and attracting resources toward suicide prevention activities and programs, and avoiding duplication of effort.

A community-based network can be the birth place for suicide prevention projects. The collective knowledge, efforts and collaborative decision making practices of network members can produce better outcomes than those that could be achieved by working in isolation. The most effective networks have cross-sectorial representation and cooperation, involving community agencies, schools, health services, local business, general practitioners and other relevant service providers. Some communities have active, formal networks which specifically target suicide prevention.

5. Mobilise resources in the community

The best and most effective resources to support suicide prevention initiatives are often the ones located within the local region. Starting with existing community resources and assets is a key strategy for mobilising other resources beyond the local community.

Given the broad scope of suicide prevention activities in local communities, the type of resources which are typically required are: skilled and knowledgeable people who have a sound understanding of the theory, evidence and do no harm approach related to suicide prevention; access to current information and research on suicide prevention; funding support; and infrastructure resources, such as information technology and meeting spaces.

6. Make it last

Some suicide prevention activities are designed to be one-off, short-term projects with defined and measurable outcomes. Others aim to have a long-term effect and require dedicated and planned strategies to ensure sustainability.

In a limited funding and resource environment, use of cooperative resourcing arrangements between community-based groups can stretch limited resources further. Cross-sectorial support within government and business can also enhance the sustainability of suicide prevention programs.

Funding bodies are placing an increasing emphasis on building an evidence base of the role communities can play in developing local solutions, and of the ability of particular suicide prevention activities to increase community capacity in meeting the needs of all groups.

Building community capacity to respond to warning signs for suicide

- Educate key community gatekeepers. There are many people in the community, such as general practitioners, mental health workers, other health professionals, community services personnel, telephone crisis line workers, ministers of religion, and local service providers who may come in contact with people who are showing the warning signs of suicide or who have experience in dealing with these situations. It is important that local community leaders are aware of the warning signs for suicide and know how to respond appropriately.
- Build a local suicide prevention network. It can be helpful for people who are most likely to come in contact with people who are feeling suicidal to have a list of contact numbers for local support services. This should include local emergency services, community mental health services, hospitals, and other community-based resources, who can be contacted quickly when necessary. Bring representatives of local services together on a regular basis and implement a local suicide prevention strategy and response plan, so that everyone who needs it will get to the appropriate service more quickly. Each service knows they are not being left to assist large numbers of people on their own.

More information

There is a wealth of information and literature available to assist communities and service providers to understand and undertake community capacity-building activities. Strategies and options need to be matched to the levels of skill and experience available in the community, and to the type of suicide prevention activity that is planned.

- Fact sheet 12 (Working together for suicide prevention) provides information on activities and processes required for effective partnerships in suicide prevention.
- Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – resources, research and networking for people involved in suicide prevention: livingisforeveryone.com.au
- Mental health & well being – information on the Australian Government's role and contributions to mental health reform activities in Australia: www.mentalhealth.gov.au