

# Voluntary guidelines for suicide-related wellbeing support events

5 March 2019

## Introduction

These guidelines are designed as a voluntary guide for organisations and groups wanting to hold suicide awareness events (as distinct from suicide prevention training) in their community.

This document acknowledges that at times it is important that we have a broader and more open discussion about suicide in our communities, and that for the vast majority of those who attend such events, the discussion will be useful, educational and ideally, empowering to make a difference.

However, research has shown that it can increase the risk of attempts at self-harm and suicide for some people who are already vulnerable. These voluntary guidelines are designed for the protection of those who may be vulnerable.

These guidelines have been developed in consultation with a number of Nelson/Marlborough agencies and individuals supporting suicide prevention activity in their community who work in suicide prevention and postvention.

Before organising an event it is important to consider the goals and design the session to meet these goals. Goals should focus on aspects that may reduce risk so increasing awareness of suicide would not be an appropriate goal on its own.

Where increasing awareness of support services, ways to start conversations for people who may be distressed, community cohesion, opportunities for purposeful activity, recognition of alcohol-related risks might help set the format of an event.

## Reducing risk for vulnerable people

We know that asking vulnerable people if they are thinking about suicide does not raise the risk of their attempting suicide. If the person responds "yes, they have been thinking about suicide", suicide prevention best practice indicates that the most effective response is to then maintain connection and conversation with that person until that person connects with someone who has specific skills in working through the vulnerable person's concerns and thoughts of suicide.

Consequently we can assume that a vulnerable person attending a suicide awareness raising event will not increase their risk, providing the event has:

- good supports to ensure vulnerable people in the audience are able to be identified
- information on local community support services

- where possible when people stand up at a public meeting and raise their personal issues with indications of distress and/or anger, that organisers undertake to contact the person immediately after the meeting and ideally again in a few days' time to check in on their wellbeing
- organised one-on-one counselling is available for anyone who may need that initial support, before being referred to more sustainable local community supports
- ensure as far as possible that the information delivered verbally at the meeting by presenters or speakers from the floor is accurate, or that there is opportunity for others to provide correction. At times there can be a trend to dramatise the severity of the local problem which may mislead people into a greater pre-occupation than is healthy for their wellbeing
- most importantly, that in the presentation or presentations to the public, solutions are offered to both keep vulnerable people safe, and how someone can keep a vulnerable person safe, eg the use of safety plans, where to go for help (the various triaged risk levels), the value of suicide prevention gatekeeper training, and the wide range of support services available (not just mental health services or one particular organisation). A solutions -based approach to delivery about suicide issues is essential to keeping vulnerable people safe.
- encouraging the public to view suicide prevention as a complex whole-of-community issue, eg not over-simplifying it as a mental health issue or some other agency's sole responsibility.
- where possible and appropriate, provide information to the speaker about current local community risks (anonymous information only), so that they can either avoid those issues or discuss them with safe parameters. Orientation of speakers is important as at times speakers from outside of a community may make assumptions about risks and services that are misleading and possibly harmful.

### **Information about local community supports**

It is recommended that the agency initiating a wellbeing awareness-raising event make early contact in the planning stages with their local suicide pre- and postvention groups and also the Nelson Marlborough Health suicide prevention coordinator. The coordinator may also be able assist in advising who to contact in that community and help with some aspects of organisation.

The event organiser needs to be aware of any specific local suicide risk issues (eg false rumours about cases or a recent spike in suicide attempts or deaths in that community) and a discussion with local support agencies or postvention group as to whether proceeding with the event is consequently advisable if there are community risk issues identified or alternatively, what additional supports need to be put in place to ensure safety as much as possible.

If the decision is made to proceed, the event organiser will then:

- consider the best ways to share information about the event and its purpose, to attract the intended audience
- advise local schools and educational institutions where relevant of the event so they can be prepared to support students should this be required
- ensure that both relevant local community support agencies and government agencies (eg DHB mental health services) provide pamphlets and contact details about their services at the event, and ideally a representative of that agency is present at the meeting to answer any questions about their services
- ensure that an opportunity is given at the event to verbally introduce those agencies present
- provide, where possible, an opportunity to talk one-on-one after the event over a coffee or tea and snacks (but no alcohol)
- ensure that generic pamphlets on suicide prevention and 'after a suicide' care are available at the event for people to take home. Resources are also available from the Nelson Marlborough Public Health Service.

For more information on suicide prevention go to:  
<https://www.nmdhb.govt.nz/suicideprevention>