

## **Research and Guidelines**

Containing Institutional Anxiety: Factors to consider  
about student suicide

June 2018

**Adam Percy**  
Head of Counselling University of Oxford

[www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

# Emotional Impact of Suicide

- ‘Staring at the sun’
- Overwhelming rational thinking (case example)
- Need for ‘Auxiliary Ego’
- Institution as ‘client’
- Promoting Reflective rather than Reactive response

# Public Health England Updated ‘Guidelines on Suicide Cluster’ Professor Keith Hawton

- New Section for Universities and Colleges
- Give a framework to education institutions to help understand what a suicide cluster is and know when to be concerned that one may be emerging

# Guidelines on Suicide Cluster: Key Factors

- Importance for Universities and Colleges to be represented on Local Authority Multi-Agency Suicide Prevention Groups
- Identifying Leadership and forming a 'Suicide Response Group' (core membership and wider group)
- Identification and surveillance of patterns

# Guidelines on Suicide Cluster: Key Factors

- Sharing information
- Prevention and Support for Students and Staff
- Monitoring and transparency
- Communications and Media

# Guidelines on Suicide Cluster: Key Factors

- Ensure a rapid and appropriate response
- Need to link in with other institutions and groups in the local area
- Longer term support and monitoring

# Factors that may contribute to risk of suicide in students

- Transition and Change
- Mental health and psychological factors:
  - Depression
  - Bipolar disorder
  - Anxiety disorders
  - Eating disorders
  - Substance misuse

# Factors that may contribute to risk of suicide in students

- Perfectionism
- Sleep disturbance
- Mood instability
- Academic problems
- Relationship issues
- Financial difficulties
- Family issues
- Bullying
- Sexuality and Identity issues
- Physical illness



# Institutional Fear of Suicide

- Evidence of effectiveness of risk assessments?
- ‘Gut Feeling’ or Clinical Knowledge and Experience
- Anxiety of uncertainty
- Desire of certainty / false hope

# Psychodynamic Insights about Suicidality and Young Adults

- Loss of sense of reality about Death
- Disassociation: ‘Sleeping walking towards suicide’
- Isolation / Cutting off from relationships
- Cutting off aspects of relationships / Secrecy
- Self Hate and Guilt
- Perfectionism
- Impulsivity
- Confusion of what is ‘help’: can be ‘all or nothing’

# Rational Perspective helps Contain Overwhelming Emotional Response

- How is the Narrative around student suicide being created?
- What are the ‘facts’ about student suicide?
- How are statistics used or reported?

## No. of Student Suicide in UK



# How Student Suicide Figures are Reported or Used?

- 75 in 2007 to 146 in 2016 (England and Wales)
- Rise of '56 per cent in 10 years'
- In 2001 there were 108 student suicides
- 2016 this had increased to 146
- 2001 under 2 million students
- 2016 there were 2.32million

# How Student Suicide Figures are Reported or Used?

- 2016 there was 38 more suicides than in 2001
- Increase of 330,000 students over that period
- total number has increased
- rate of student suicide has gone down
- 2001, the suicide rate for 10- to 29-year-olds was 13 in 100,000
- 2016, this rate was down to 10.5 in 100,000.

# How Student Suicide Figures are Reported or Used?

- Over 15 year period number fluctuating between 100 and 146
- Starting at 2007 is using the lowest number
- However, numbers of student suicide is now increasing with stable total numbers
- First time possibly above suicide rate of similar age group (18-25)
- Need for greater research and evidence
- ONS and UUK research (June 2018)

# ‘Crisis of Student Mental Health’ Media Reporting

- Over-emphasising negative information and downplaying positive information
- All or nothing thinking
- Judging against some imaginary ‘perfect’ standard
- Personalising rather than looking at the wider picture (individual narrative rather than systemic functioning)
- ‘Catastrophizing’ rather than maintain perspective



# Contributory Factors affecting Suicide Clustering:

- Contagion -exposure to suicide and self-harm
- Clustering of suicidal behaviour common in young people
- Exposure to suicide and self-harm online and social media
- Media bias towards reporting of suicides in students (1 in 5 media reports on suicide concern students/school pupils) risk of normalisation of suicidal behaviour

# Concluding Thoughts:

Historical precedents

Danger of being judged against impossible  
'targets'

Is reflective action possible in an increasingly  
toxic 'blame culture'?

Institutional anxiety driving changes in Student  
Service?

Focus on 'symptoms' and perceived problems  
rather than underlying causes

Student Services changing more about 'customer  
satisfaction' rather than real evidence based  
clinical counselling/interventions