



WSPD WEBINAR SERIES 2020

The role of connectedness in suicide prevention

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Why connectedness matters

In trying to understand why it matters to have friends, family or even just people to care about and care about us, it becomes apparent that we are ‘wired to connect’. Our neurobiology evolved to promote, seek and nurture connection with others, starting from before we are born!

When we look at neurochemistry, we see that certain processes can facilitate positive experiences, and this reinforces our ability to experience and show empathy or more broadly, compassion towards others. The process of connecting and responding to others can be described as reciprocity and mutuality or ‘synchrony’ in relationships.

Unfortunately, our busy lives can interrupt the ability to create deep and meaningful connections. Similarly, experiences of trauma and neglect can also influence how a person experiences relationship and the capacity to safely connect with others.

Interpersonal theory of suicide

Thomas Joiner (2005) highlights the role of meaningful connections in his theory of suicidal behaviour – the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide. In this theory there are three primary components that together, provide the conditions for suicidal ideation to not only emerge, but continue to suicidal behaviours.

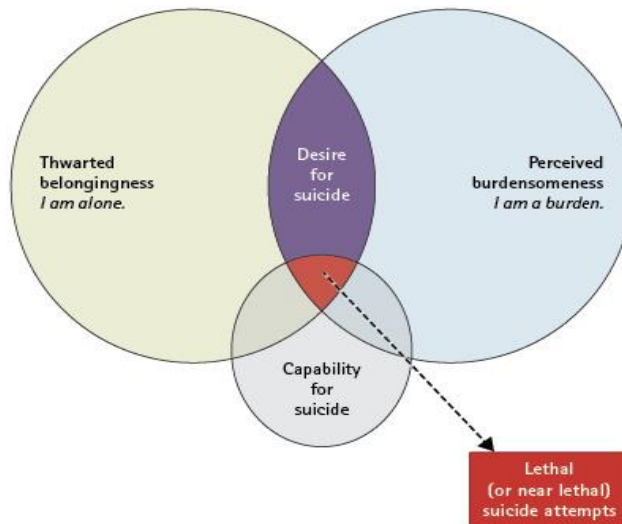


Diagram – Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behaviour (Joiner, 2005)¹

Thwarted belongingness

The perception that one doesn’t belong and that one is an ‘outsider’ or not part of the larger social or cultural unit. This is the sense that a person doesn’t belong or that they are alone.

Perceived burdensomeness

The term ‘perceived’ is important here, both as a challenge and an opportunity. Sometimes there is no indication or evidence that a person is a ‘burden’, yet the term ‘perceived’ can not be evaluated by a person that has taken their own life. There is evidence though, that someone feeling as though others are ‘better off without me’ would reflect a sense of burdensomeness.

Capability for suicide

¹ Joiner, T. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

The capability for suicide may relate to a person’s knowledge and understanding of lethal methods for suicide, their exposure and familiarity with death (as through their work, for example) or their fearlessness of pain. The capability for suicide is not considered herein, however, it is a critical component to this theory.

Reflection – what do you see as interrupting meaningful connections?

Flexibility vs doing it all

Technology is an amazing advancement to the modern world, offering medicine, education and scientific advances that can change the way we live. However, there are some challenges also.

Firstly, the way technology has entered our homes and pushes our boundaries, can be difficult to manage. We can be contacted and found, 24 hours per day, seven days per week. The way that technology and specific apps (like social media) means that we engage easily, but disengaging is harder.

We can experience “fear of missing out” or FOMO, increasing a sense of disconnection when we are not regularly checking in or part of the online world. Importantly, it takes time to make meaningful interpersonal connections, yet online, this ‘connection’ may not have the depth that can withstand disagreements or personal setbacks. We can enjoy some aspects that technology offer, but we need to be realistic that it’s not a panacea.

We know that the quality of our connections is what is most important

quality not quantity

yet again, this can be difficult to navigate. If we were not parented in a way that facilitates connecting with others – teaches us how to communicate, how to resolve problems, how to express interest, compassion or frustration, it can limit our ability to effectively engage with others when a problem arises. The quality of our connections, with deep understanding, shapes how we feel and experience empathy .

Reflection – what do you see as valuable in using technology for connectedness?

Synchrony and Mutuality

Synchrony that is defined according to neurobiology pertains to:

*The harmonisation of biological and behavioural processes that occurs when people feel connected, measured as a function of neurobiological representations of human attachment*²

Behavioural responses that are subconsciously &/or spontaneously expressed through nonverbal behaviours

- Smiling at one another
- Laughing together
- Physically imagining the pain of another and wincing

Facilitated through neurochemicals such as dopamine and oxytocin

Definitions differ depending on circumstance and context, however, we have defined mutuality to be:

a shared feeling and understanding of experience, achieved through compassionate communication, engagement and reflection inclusive of the divergent origins of an individuals' experience

In understanding this, how we create and interpret meaning is important. Mead & Filson (2017) report that "... we operate out of our own experiences and beliefs [and may make the] assumption that everyone else sees the world"³ in the same way we do. Mutuality is the conscious choice to see from the others' perspective.

Mutuality acknowledges inequity and can be limited by systems that inhibit empathic self-reflection.

Reflection – How might these principles support suicide prevention?

² Feldman, R., (2017) The neurobiology of human attachments, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2016.11.007>

³ Mead, S. & Filson, B. (2017). Mutuality and shared power as an alternative to coercion and force. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, DOI: 10.1108/MHSI-03-2017-0011

5 tips to enhance connectedness

1. Focus on quality connections, not quantity

The number of connections, friends or family members is not the key point here. What is important is that a person works to create and nurture a connection that they can trust and feel genuine understanding and acceptance with. This may be within a family unit, but similarly, if family don't offer strong connections or opportunity to be heard and understood, initiating friendship or connections can be through common interests – which may be school/work, sport, cultural or spiritual activities. Really, anything where someone has the ability to talk with others, is an opportunity to look at connecting.

2. Practice interpersonal skills

Sometimes communicating doesn't come naturally. In fact, for some people, it can be incredibly difficult to talk to just start a conversation. What can be helpful is to practice interpersonal skills – from general starting points of building eye contact and using open body language, through to more complex skills, such as responding to disagreements, being assertive and speaking in public.

Practicing interpersonal skills in different settings can also help to build confidence for other areas. People can be supported in initiating conversations and inviting friendships, through role playing with treatment providers, such as counsellors or therapists.

3. Use activities to facilitate connection

Often it is easier to start conversations between two people when they are mutually interested in and focused upon, a common interest. This can be as simple as inviting a neighbour to go walking with you, where you have a shared goal of increasing your fitness and activity levels, but while walking, you naturally talk about why that is important to you.

While it is a helpful approach for women also, it's become a common recommendation for people looking to check in on a man they are worried about to do this while they are both focused on a task. Similarly, if someone feels awkward or socially anxious initiating conversations, it may be helpful to find activities they enjoy doing, such as riding a bike, going to the gym, or walking, where the intensity of the social interaction is dampened by being able to focus on the activity.

4. Leverage online resources, including social media

Social media has amazing benefits in offering groups that cover any number of interests and commonalities for people. While there are certainly risks involved with catching up with people you have never met before, it can be an opportunity to find local (affordable) activities – and therefore people – to connect with.

Check out Apps such as 'Meet up', which are based on people entering their interest and seeing when people might be catching up.

5. Consider family therapy or professional strategies to reduce impacts of conflict

Not all relationships are easy and certainly, the early attachments and people in our lives set the stage for how we relate and understand others. If there are difficult patterns experienced for someone, it may be that engaging a therapist is the best approach to understanding why these relationships are so difficult and how you might overcome them. Similarly, engaging a family therapist may be useful in supporting healthy communication and the reparation of potentially unhealthy family connections.

