

World Suicide Prevention Day

By Fr Andrew Hamilton SJ, 10 September 2019



September 10 is World Suicide Prevention Day.

That suicide is the most frequent cause of the death of young Australians, and particularly of young Indigenous Australians, is a disturbing thought. Apart from statistics it is appalling that young people whom we hope would look forward with so much energy and optimism to their future lives can be so driven by their pain to end them. The Day invites us to reflect with compassion on the young people who have taken their own lives. It also encourages us to ask what kind of a society we are creating that leaves many young people in such despair.

One of the factors that can lead people to suicide is isolation. It is also often one of the effects of suicide on the families and friends of people who have taken their own lives. People who suffer from mental illness can find it hard to communicate with other people and to relate in groups. Their own inner pain can be overwhelming. They cannot find words for it. Nor can they summon the trust and energy they would need to talk to others about their experience. Their silence can then deepen as family members feel helpless and excluded. They can then become locked into silence, despairing of their capacity to relate to others and wanting to spare them the pain of their company. Suicide may then be seen as the only way to end their pain.

The Australian Government is right to pledge resources to address youth suicide. There will be no magic bullet, however. The factors contributing to a young person's decision to end their life can include mental and physical illness, addiction, the experience of problems at education or work, and lack of access to supportive programs of housing and other care. If we are to offer young people a better way we need also to address the social difficulties they face in their homes and communities.

Medication and counselling will be important, often essential. But crucial also will be the building and strengthening of relationships in which they are listened to compassionately when they speak of their pain and desperation, and find resources for accepting and living through it.

The families and friends of people who have suicided need the same support. Above all they need to be able to talk about the feelings of loss, shame, guilt, anger and confusion that can overwhelm them. This can be difficult because such a strong stigma attaches to suicide. People can feel afraid to open the subject and embarrassed when others talk about it. As a result they keep silent. But their feelings remain and eat at their lives.

That is why programs like those of Support after Suicide in which people can find counselling or conversation with people who have suffered the same experience in a safe environment are so important. Breaking silence can be the first step to recovering life.

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