



Connecting for Life

2 Engaging young people in suicide prevention practice

Suicide Prevention in Ireland – key messages for practice

Learning from Research and Practice in Suicide Prevention in Ireland during the first five years of Connecting for Life.

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Engaging young people – six key messages

1

Community outreach and awareness-raising activities should be clear, consistent, and targeted at young people.

The need for education and awareness-raising around mental health and wellbeing from an early age appeared in almost all reports. Experience in school and university settings indicates that campaigns and materials should be visible, engaging, ongoing rather than once off, and should ideally involve students or student support staff in their design. Language use is important and campaigns should target and be sensitive to the specific issues facing young people (e.g. substance misuse, financial difficulties or exam pressures). As young people may not be aware of the supports available, organisations and educational institutions need to be clear about the service they offer and referral pathways. Young people living in rural areas face particular challenges accessing services, and there were good examples of community outreach strategies for example, Jigsaw services.

2

Organisations can access a wide range of existing evidence based programmes, but need to consider the context for their implementation.

Examples of evidence-based programmes featured in the reports included Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (DBT-STEPS A), which was used in Irish schools to reduce psychological distress and promote positive mental health. Experience highlights the challenge of balancing the core components of a programme with the need for local adaptation, particularly when replicating or scaling up a programme. Positive experiences from the reports reflected a high degree of local ownership.

3

Peer support is an important feature of youth mental health initiatives.

The use of ambassadors who share their lived experience of mental health issues may reduce stigma and normalise help-seeking, particularly among hard-to-reach groups. Research indicates that student ‘gatekeepers’ trained in identifying and referring mental health problems may facilitate early intervention for young people at risk of suicide.

4

Young people are more likely to seek out and engage with mental health information online and this is an important factor in communications, engaging and identifying those at risk.

Digital resources and services should be accessible, up-to-date and in line with best practice in youth mental health. Harmful online content can pose a significant risk to vulnerable young people, and there is a need to address online safety in suicide prevention interventions.

5

Practitioners should be aware of the influence of factors such as gender, socioeconomic status and identity.

For young men, this review highlights the importance of strength-based approaches that challenge gender norms, and of accessing hard-to-reach groups through existing programmes and services (e.g., community sports initiatives). Young mothers are at risk of isolation even within well populated urban areas. The impact of socioeconomic deprivation on young people's mental health needs to be better understood and addressed in service design, and more research is needed on the risk factors experienced by already vulnerable groups, such as young Travellers, and young LGBTQ+ people.

To help address this research need, HSE NOSP has established a research grant scheme to support research into vulnerable groups and risk factors.

6

Local partnership and interagency working is important but needs structure to work effectively, as well as good communication between statutory and voluntary organisations.

Partnerships between community, health and child & adolescent organisations can facilitate greater awareness and uptake of programmes, as well as clearer referral and aftercare pathways for young people. Wrap around approaches or those which bring together existing interventions should be further explored as a way to build links between agencies.

About this brief

Frontline practitioners in statutory and community services play a critical role in identifying, referring and supporting young people at risk of suicide or self-harm. Awareness campaigns, resources, helplines, and evidence informed interventions are some of the activities which feature in suicide prevention work. Research and evaluation of these activities helps us to understand more about how services can respond, and approaches which are effective, particularly for individuals and groups at risk of suicide.

This research brief draws on a series of 31 independent reports based on research and evaluation of suicide prevention services and interventions delivered during the first five years of *Connecting for Life*, Ireland's national suicide prevention strategy.

Background

The National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) in the HSE leads on the co-ordination, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the *Connecting for Life* strategy. *Connecting for Life* identifies a set of priorities aimed at reducing suicide and self-harm, both among the general population and among specific vulnerable groups. NOSP regularly invests in research, interventions and services aimed at supporting people's mental health and advancing knowledge of the risk factors for self-harm and suicide.

NOSP commissioned the Centre for Effective Services (CES) to synthesise key findings across the reports, and to produce a series of briefs which highlight useful learning to inform policy and practice in the area of suicide prevention.

The series includes an executive summary of the synthesis, and three briefs which focus on key themes emerging from the synthesis, including: **engaging young people, engaging men** and **supporting staff**.

Suicide prevention and young people

The reports reviewed were wide-ranging and addressed topics as diverse as peer prisoner mentoring and social prescribing interventions. Seven of the thirty one reports featured within the collection focused on young people, and this brief includes key messages and learning from those reports.

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death for young people in Europe (WHO, 2019). Recent figures estimate that eight in 100,000 adolescents will die by suicide each year in Ireland (OECD, 2020), with rates here the fourth highest in the EU. Levels of psychological distress and self-harm are estimated to be considerably higher. Lengthy periods of restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic may have exacerbated existing mental health issues amongst young people.

The key messages and learning outlined here add to a growing body of knowledge on suicide prevention in research and practice, and will be of interest to practitioners working in a range of settings involving young people.

Other reports in this series are available on the [HSE NOSP website](#).