

Managing social stigma after suicide

Stigma attached to suicide is rooted in centuries of history and misplaced associations of weakness, blame, shame, and even sin or crime. Stigma can prevent people from seeking help when they need it, and can prevent others from offering support when they want to. It can colour our perceptions, thoughts and actions. It is reflected in our language and behaviour towards ourselves and others.

The impact of stigma

Stigma can impact on bereaved people in many ways. For instance, family relationships and friendships can become strained through hurtful comments, misunderstandings and actions in relation to the type of death. Research suggests that if people experience stigma it can lead them having complicated grief and suicidal thinking. Often people feel isolated, that their friends are avoiding them, or excluding them from social events. At times a person bereaved by suicide may feel that their grief is not legitimate in the eyes of others, or immense pressure to “get over it” quickly. They may perceive other people’s attitude is stigmatising. This may not be the case. The person may care about them and want to help but not know what to say or do.

How can we challenge stigma?

We can all help to reduce stigma within our communities and support better understanding for people bereaved by suicide. Here are some ideas:

- Learn and share the facts about suicide.
- Be aware of your attitudes and behaviour. See people (including yourself) as unique human beings, not as labels or stereotypes.
- Support suicide prevention programs as a way to create meaning for your loved one’s death.
- If you feel comfortable, speak up in protest when friends, family, colleagues or the media display false beliefs and negative stereotypes. Things like “that was so selfish”, “he couldn’t cope with life”, “he didn’t consider what this would do to you” are all examples of negative stereotyping.

You may choose to respond with respectful conversation about these beliefs including explaining, for instance:

- “The majority of people who are suicidal do not want to die. They are in pain, and they want to stop the pain”.
- “Anyone may be vulnerable when confronting difficult circumstances or when experiencing feelings of depression or hopelessness”.
- “What the suicidal person is thinking at the time is actually quite different from selfishness. They may be thinking “others will be better off without me”.

Choose your words carefully

The way we speak can affect the way other people think and speak about suicide.

Stigmatising terminology

- Committed suicide.
- Successful suicide.
- Completed suicide.
- Failed attempt at suicide.

Respectful terminology

- Died by suicide.
- Suicided.
- Ended his/her life or took his/her own life.
- Non-fatal attempt at suicide.



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