

INQUIRY INTO SUICIDE IN AUSTRALIA

INTRODUCTION

Loneliness is the terminal illness of Australian society. It is loneliness born of an inability to express our feelings, the scarcity of people who are prepared to listen, and the bottling of feelings that leads to despair and suicide.

The push to legalise suicide through voluntary euthanasia sends entirely the wrong message to people suffering emotional or physical pain. Survival is our most powerful instinct and it is alarming that individuals and government are ignoring this fact.

An addiction counsellor for over 30 years I have shared the grief of many relatives and friends following the suicide of a person they loved and valued. I have found that the dominant 'feeling' in the bereaved is anger. Anger that this person took his/her life, anger they can't admit because they think it is inappropriate to feel this way - despite it being part of grief.

Feelings are facts yet we Australians are 'feeling' illiterate. An inability to identify, own, express and deal with our feelings is a common problem in Australians. It is the crux of addiction, the trigger for violence, and up to 2000 suicides per year.

Addiction is a feeling illness - people use alcohol and drugs, both legal and illegal, gamble, overeat, shop, exercise - to get temporary relief from their misery and change the way they feel - until, due to long-term use, these *activities* no longer ease the distress of:

- loneliness
- broken relationships,
- job loss
- separation or divorce
- financial and legal problems

Emotional pain is common to us all and the only way for the pain to get out is for us to talk about it - over and over again if necessary. Sadly listeners think that they have to do something about it but often it's enough just to listen.

I had a nephew whose wife left him and took the two children - just when he appeared to be turning the corner he hanged himself. To my mind the medication he was prescribed simply masked his feelings and locked them in. I know that even when a suicidal person enters a Psyche ward for their own protection they are simply medicated rather than encouraged to talk - staff emerge from their glass enclosure only to distribute medication!

When I was growing up everyone in the neighbourhood knew each other and was there for each other. Now there is no popping next door or talking over the fence. I notice a bit of nostalgia for times past appearing in TV programs. Children too remain indoors and no matter what suburb you enter the streets are empty of children who are probably indoors fixated on their computer games. Is it any wonder we are increasingly dominated by a nameless fear of other people and a tendency to isolate. There is even a Broadband advertisement that proposes a computer in every room - now there's a recipe for madness!

Children are driven to school because of ‘stranger danger’ when one of the greatest joys of childhood is the walk to and from school. That’s where friendships are forged, observations are made and we learn to relate now we have substituted Psychological fear.

Conversation is scarce even within the home. Family members often pass like ships in the night. Families don’t share meals together discuss anything or take the time to get to know each other.

In short we are each little islands of misery and with the breakdown of families the situation promises to get even worse.

THE PERSONAL, SOCIAL AND FINANCIAL COSTS OF SUICIDE

When in 2008, ‘All Saints’ star Mark Priestly threw himself to his death it had an enormous impact on may thousands of viewers - it is horrifying that any person could reach such a state of despair in ‘the lucky country’.

Despite the horror of around 2000 lives lost to suicide each year Australians get only head learning. The sooner we start teaching people to identify, own and deal with their feelings without resorting to violence and/or suicide the better. Every death has a negative impact on a minimum of 15 people including police and health workers.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC AWARENESS PROGRAMS

It is good that suicide is being discussed but NOT I fear by those most deeply affected. Family members have a sense of shame when someone they love succumbs to despair and try to distance themselves from the pain by not talking about it – a form of denial that serves to curtail the essential mourning process.

I attended the funeral of a young musician who killed himself. Those attending were mostly young and the pews shook with their uncontrollable emotions - a very healthy and natural release for them all but it is my guess that they then put their feelings for Aaron aside and avoided talking about their friend for fear of upsetting others. Let a tear appear in anyone’s eye and we change the subject! Yet it is through talking that pent up feelings are released.

Families cope by pretending it never happened. We all need to hear more from those who mourn the loss of a loved one particularly following suicide. Australian Story is one of the few programs that tackle this sharing of the aftermath of disaster and yet because it is on ABC many people never benefit from this valuable sharing that is far more effective than suicide prevention strategies.

FRONT LINE SERVICES TO PEOPLE AT RISK

The service at emergency departments has improved greatly. Not because of any suicide prevention strategy but because of the emphasis on ‘duty of care’. There were times in the past where the attitude appeared to be “well if she wants to kill herself – let her get on with it”. Now they at least admit the person to the Psyche Ward for a few days but as I said in my introduction staff medicate the patient and seldom make themselves available to *listen*.

Life Line is invaluable because they are contactable 24hrs a day. It would be interesting to know how many lives have been saved through these trained listeners who are available day and night.

PEOPLE PRONE TO TAKE THEIR OWN LIVES

Family breakdown is taking its toll. It is not just divorce and separation but the crazy working hours that result in less family time.

With both parents working couples often pass like ships in the night and communication is reduced to notes or brief verbal messages.

There is growing lack of comfort in relationships. It has a lot to do with Sunday trading and quite unnecessary 24 hr. shopping. It is unnecessary for shops to be open all weekend when staff could to be at home with their family. The public will always find a way to shop in normal shopping hours.

A child recently killed herself following Cyber bullying.

The teens are particularly painful - half child and half adult - young people frequently find emotional pain intolerable. The Victorian government recently sent extra counsellors to Geelong's Western Heights Secondary College, after four current or former students committed suicide in six months. I met a student at a State Matriculation College who has tried to kill himself three times. People speaking to them won't help - we need to 'listen' to them and they will only talk if they trust.

Learning about feelings engenders trust because during the learning process people discover, often for the first time, that many people 'feel' the same way they do.

If we are to survive, we Australians must learn to identify, own – “these are my feelings” (not blame someone else for the way we feel) and deal appropriately with our feelings without recourse to drugs or suicide.

Submitted by Catholic Women's League Australia Inc.

Compiled by: National Social Issues Convenor

Betty Roberts OAM