

Kate Matherson

20.11.2009

Committee Secretary  
Senate Community Affairs References Committee  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

**Subject: Inquiry into Suicide in Australia**

Hi, I am a 20year old Social Work student, I am writing to the inquiry in a number of roles, first and foremost as someone who has attempted suicide less than six months ago, as someone who has lost a love one to suicide and as one who has cared for a suicidal younger sister. Secondly I write as a social work student, as someone who has studied the issue of suicide and who has worked in a setting in which most clients were suicidal and had attempted suicide, often numerous times.

I would like to start by addressing the main issue of your inquiry, the impact of suicide on the Australian community. I will look specifically at the personal, social and financial impact of suicide. I would like to do that by telling my personal story. I could list off numerous facts and figures, give you an academic overview of the subject but I feel that you can obtain this information yourself, instead I would like to show you the face of those statistics. This isn't about numbers, it is about the true cost of suicide, the face of pain that is not often seen due to the stigma that surrounds the issue. I believe that showing you this is vitally important as it is only through the experience of those who have had to deal with suicide that a true picture of the situation can be formed.

In social work we have a saying that 'the client is the expert', I believe this to be true in this situation. We are the people this report is about and we are the ones who can give a true picture of what is happening and what needs to be done, so I would like to thank you greatly for that opportunity and I hope that what I have to share shall be of use to you. You see this isn't just my story it is the story of thousands of Australians every year who's lives are torn apart by attempted suicide, suicide, depression and other mental illnesses. It's an issue that the Australian community doesn't understand and seems not to want to understand. The stigma that surrounds depression and suicide makes it hard for one to ever return to the somewhat normal life that they may have had before, it makes them feel ashamed, unworthy, disgusting, different and alienated all things I have experienced recently. This is the face of suicide that I want to show you, the personal and devastating effects that permeate every aspect of life.

Suicide is an issue that is not foreign to my life. My early memories of what I knew of suicide as a child was that only very bad people committed suicide and that it wasn't something that I would have to worry about as I didn't know any bad people. I think I picked this up in school and on television. I lived with this impression of suicide until I was 12 years old. When I was 12 my uncle took his own life, I found this devastating because I did not understand how this was possible, I did not believe my uncle to be a bad person but if he had committed suicide leaving us (all of my family) behind he had to be didn't he? Questions about suicide and mental illness invaded my life as I searched for answers. How could he? Didn't he love us? Why was he so unhappy? Was there anything we could have done? Why didn't he receive the help he needed?

This was not to be my last run in with suicide. I would soon have the difficulty of trying to deal with my sister who is 5 years younger than me and her talk of death and threats of suicide during very dark periods of her childhood as she struggled with bipolar disorder with little help from professionals. This sets the background to my own struggles with suicide. In May this year I attempted suicide.

To many I was the girl least likely, I went to Church every week was a youth group leader, a university student, I didn't drink or smoke, I was the 'good girl' who always did the right thing. Nobody saw it coming it tore my family, friends and church community apart. So how did it come to this? My life was a lot more complicated than many people knew, I had not had an easy childhood and it was all starting to catch up with me. I had been battling with depression for quite a while but had only come to realise how serious it was after suffering suicidal idealisation and giving in to self-harm. I then proceeded to seek treatment from a local general practitioner and was put on a low dose of an anti-depressant which caused me to experience bad side effects such as sleep loss but for awhile I thought that this was working and my doctor told me that all was looking good. I was also referred to a psychologist for counselling but was unable to get an appointment for over a month. Due to the depression I proceeded to take a break from my studies which left me with a lot of spare time and lack of purpose and I quickly plummeted further into despair and depression with suicidal thoughts slowly and surely consuming me until it seemed the only option and the inevitable happened. I began planning my suicide, and days latter attempted to take my life ending up in hospital but luckily not doing much damage to myself.

My experience in hospital was far from desirable. Upon arriving at the emergency room I was quizzed by the triage nurse about why I had done this to myself and told that 'there must be a reason and I must know why' all whilst struggling to remain conscious and just wanting to receive help not be lectured. It was hours before I was given a bed and treatment and testing begun, in which time little to no attention was paid to me and for all I knew I was going to die sitting there in a chair in the emergency room. My run in with staff was not much better once I got a bed, one nurse who came to take some blood said little to me except 'was this your first time?' this question shocked me; the lack of compassion and concern for me was evident. After many tests in emergency they eventually found me a bed in the cardiac ward of the hospital. I was clearly the

odd one out in this ward being only 20, the nurses made it obvious by their whispering in the hallways that I was their gossip for the night, their unprofessional behaviour was even overheard by my sister the next morning as she walked past. I spent this first night alone in a single room of the hospital, no body had talked to me about what I had done or whether I was still suicidal, I wasn't but if I had been there was plenty of opportunity for me in that room to have taken my life. It wasn't until late the next day that I was able to see someone from the mental health team and talk to them about what had happened and have my mental health assessed. I was linked in to the team at the hospital and with one of their psychiatrists and sent home that day.

I was happy to be home and to be having my depression dealt with properly by a psychiatrist now and also had the support of the mental health team calling me at home to see how I was going. Despite this I was still struggling, I was having difficulty finding the right medication and dose and was quickly being consumed by suicidal thoughts again. I learnt to hide this from the mental health team as I did not find their services useful. I think this was because whilst they called me regularly and asked all the right questions there was no formation of a relationship or development of trust as it was often different people who called me each day and whilst they had read over my case they had not actually met or talked to me before.

The biggest struggle was in trying to return to a somewhat normal life that wasn't overshadowed by my suicide attempt. There are no guides, no books, no advice on how to recover from a suicide attempt other than take anti-depressants, see a psychiatrist and a psychologist, maintain a safety plan but what about the practical things like who to tell about your struggles and how to tell them and when to go back to your daily activities and your job. Whilst psychiatrists and psychologists know lots of things on dealing with depression and mental illness no where could I find advice on the simple every day things.

After my suicide attempt I struggled so much with the feeling that I had screwed up so badly, that this time it couldn't be fixed, my life was in ruins and I thought I had lost everything. I had dropped out of uni, my job was on the line because I had become unreliable and had taken a fair amount of time off, medical bills were piling up, my relationships were falling apart and I felt I had lost myself; the image of the person I had thought I was, was destroyed by these actions that seemed so opposed to that person. The hardest part was the way my relationships were affected. There were many different reactions to my struggles, which tend to fall into three categories, those few who understood what I was going through and offered as much support as they could, those who did not understand but tried as hard as they could and those who did not understand and did not wish to. Many of my friends were very supportive at first, I was open to talking to them about it and trying to help them to understand which helped them a lot but slowly they grew weary of my struggles and began to become more distant and grow apart from me. Other people were not so supportive some people refused to acknowledge what had happened, some avoiding me, others simply pretending nothing was different. A rare few but some none the less blatantly told me that they wanted nothing to do with me,

that they did not believe in mental illness and thought that what I had done was wrong and was a product of the devil. This response was the most devastating of all, to have lost so much and then have your friends turn away from you in disgrace is absolutely humiliating and devastating it is the last thing that you need when going through something like this and still breaks my heart to this day.

My relationship with my Church community also became very strained. Going back to Church after my attempt was very difficult as to me my Church was my home, it was where I belonged, but after my attempt it was very difficult to return as I felt like I had let them down and that somehow I would stand out, I did not know how many people had heard about what happened and felt like everyone would somehow know and was unsure as to how they would react. I felt that somehow I was now very different to the people there and did not belong; even with the support of friends the experience of going to Church became a very anxious one. It has taken some time to become comfortable in this place again and to take up my roles again.

These are just a few of the struggles I have endured as a suicide attempt survivor. I hope that my story has helped you to see the human side of this problem. Whilst this is just one persons story there are thousands of others out there with similar stories, thousands of people hiding dark pasts under the carpet hoping no one will discover them as the results can be catastrophic due to the stigma that surrounds the issue. I hope that you will treat this issue with the respect and the urgency that it deserves, that you will see the faces behind the statistics and the pain endured that so often goes unrecognized and hidden.

As a survivor I pray that the government will take these issues seriously, it is time to stop brushing these issues under the carpet and stand up and say enough is enough!! We don't want our people dying like this anymore, we must do everything that we can to stop this!! We MUST stand up and fight, tackle these issues, implement strategies that work and provide funding that shows that this is something that we are committed to tackling. Please hear us cry out for your help, for a better future, a chance at life.

Yours truly,  
Kate Matherson