

# Lived Experience of Suicide

## CHANGING THE NARRATIVE ON SUICIDE



### The lived experience of suicide

From prehistoric through contemporary times, we have depended on story to convey our shared humanity. Our capacity for language has progressed far beyond charcoal depictions on cave walls illuminated by life-preserving fires. Yet, we continue to depend on narratives to convey knowledge and emotion. There is tremendous power in story, and thus, in our storytellers. In the not too distant past, conversations about suicide were relegated to the whispers and shadows. Fear and misunderstanding dominated the discussion, whether at family gatherings or academic conferences. The voices of people who had the most intimate and personal experiences related to suicide (ie. lived experience) were excluded, shamed, or ostracized. The narrative centered around what we might do wrong. We can change that. We need to change that if we want to drive down the rates of suicidal behaviour.

In recent times, as some countries have embraced the lived experience voice, their narratives have contributed insights and wisdom that have indeed provided immense opportunities to rethink suicide prevention. Their voices are central to suicide prevention policy, research and service design.

It is important to acknowledge however there are significant political, cultural and legal barriers in many countries in the world that need to be overcome before people with a lived experience can bring their lived expertise to suicide prevention in a truly integrated way. Too often, people have been unable to speak of their experience due to fear of retribution, discrimination, prejudice — in essence, stigma. Countering those painful and harmful messages has to be part of the new narratives around suicide.

The sharing of story through language and imagery is a fundamental part of being human. In a multitude of other forms, it is also witnessed throughout the animal kingdom. It is a powerful vehicle to share information, emotion, warn of danger, celebrate, learn and bond communities.

Whilst people with lived experience of suicide have been seeking ways to share their experiences for centuries, the nature of the story has often resulted in people feeling silenced —As a result, the support offered, the design of services, the focus of research and the basis for policy was ill-informed because the people who truly know what they need and have the insight to drive the change needed have not been empowered nor felt safe to do so. **Changing the narrative around suicide is critical to driving down suicide rates.**



**'Lived experience' embraces an endless array of perspectives. The concept may be simple, but the diversity of experience is complex - from childhood to older adults of all genders, across all cultures, and endless intersectional experiences.**



- Each of us has our own story.
- Everyone can listen and learn from all of them.
- All perspectives must be incorporated into our efforts to change the narrative of suicide.
- Starting the conversation gives us the opportunity to understand and respond to the experience.

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### How can I get involved as a person with lived experience?

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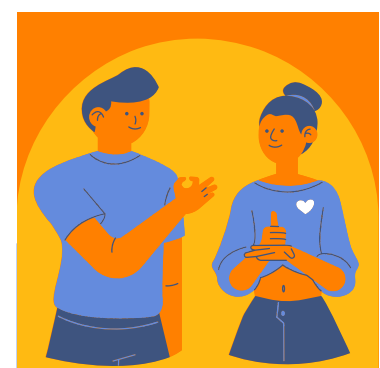
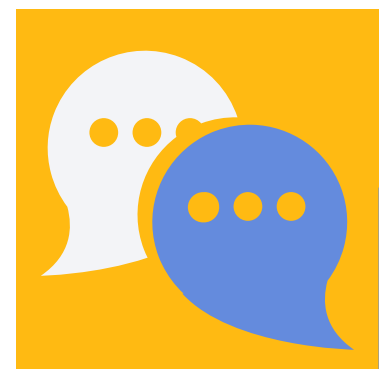
- Publicly advocate for including lived experience in suicide prevention.
- Actively contribute to creating the safety and trust required for people to share their story.
- Collaborate with other people with lived experience to host a WSPD event, or join in a local event near you.
- Seek opportunities for your invaluable lived experience story to be heard.
- Proactively encourage and support the missing narratives to be heard.
- Make time to listen deeply to and learn from other people with lived experience.



### How can my organisation help change the narrative on suicide?

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- Invest in your organisational culture such that everyone values the importance of lived experience.
- Create an environment where it is safe to identify as a person with lived experience and bring that unique lens to work.
- Empower and enable people in designated lived experience roles with decision making powers to lead change.
- Create time, space and budget to genuinely and meaningfully co-design policy, research projects, services.
- Open up conversation about suicide in your workplace.
- Review internal culture, policy, processes through a lens of how they may impact your staff and people you serve.



**Lived experience is defined as having experienced suicidal thoughts, made a suicide attempt, supported a loved one through suicidal crisis or been bereaved through suicide.**