

# Universal role to prevent suicide

MUCH has been said on the topic of the two recent student suicides in our country, including the role of our education system.

As a parent of school-going children, an educator, mental health service provider, member of a family of persons living with psychiatric disorders and a survivor of patient suicides, the issue is very close to me.

Let's reflect on two issues that have been highlighted in the recent discussions: homework and exams. Can these be stress points for students? Very likely so. Are these the only causes of student suicides? Highly unlikely, as the contributing factors for suicide are complex and multi-factorial. They span biological, psychological, social and spiritual aspects, namely psychiatric illness (depression, drug and alcohol use disorder, etc), adverse/traumatic life events (cyberbullying, sexual abuse, etc), and socio-economic inequities (poverty, etc).

Social connectedness and religion have been established as protective factors although one must be careful, especially with the latter, in terms of adopting a sensitive and non-judgemental stance. Furthermore, every case of suicide is unique, thus without a careful and comprehensive examination, such as a psychological autopsy, it would be premature to conclude decisively on why the suicide(s) occurred.

It is commendable that the Federal Government came up with some initiatives in June 2019 to address the issue of mental well-being and suicide prevention from a multi-sectoral approach. Some specific "wins" include better accessibility to crisis helplines such as Befrienders (thanks to waived call charges from eight telcos since Aug 1, 2019), and an explicit call to study the suggestion to decriminalise attempted suicide, which is

viewed by the mental health community as an important step for those most vulnerable to seek and access health services.

There have been efforts by the Health and Education ministries under the Healthy Mind Programme for mental health promotion, screening and intervention among secondary school students since 2014. These are in line with a recent World Health Organisation (WHO) discussion paper that I participated in, which included universal school-based socio-emotional learning programmes to improve mental health and prevent suicides in adolescents in a menu of population-based interventions. Continuous capacity-building, evaluation of effectiveness, especially in terms of implementation successes and challenges, and appropriate up-scaling of these efforts would be required in our local context.

I would like to quote from a news article in the *South China Morning Post* that featured a comprehensive report on student suicides in Hong Kong in 2016 by a dedicated committee comprising five working groups representing various stakeholders – school, family, mental health, tertiary students and social media. "Preventing student suicide is not just about reforming Hong Kong's education system" (<https://bit.ly/2kDZNqU>).

"The committee reviewed information from 71 cases in the past two years, based on Coroner's Court reports, police investigations, school reports and family interviews. We have identified multiple factors that contribute to students taking their lives and nearly all suffered more than one single cause, not to mention the knowledge and service gaps on suicide prevention. The report's recommendations aim to remove barriers and strengthen the existing systems to tackle stu-

dent suicides more comprehensively. Specifically, schools need support to free up time and space to care for their students, families and youth require knowledge on mental health needs, ways to seek help and early detection and intervention, gaps in the mental health service system for schools also need to be filled. All in all, we need to improve our systems (including school, healthcare, welfare and family) to promote a nurturing environment for our children. Some in the community mistakenly believe the report tried to say there is no relationship between suicide and the school system. What the report has established, based on the investigation of cases, is that there is no direct causal link between the two, but certainly all these causes (including family, mental health and adjustment problems) are related and need to be dealt with.

"There is a strong feeling in the community about the need to overhaul the school system. Certainly, a more caring and supportive system would enhance mental health. A less exam-orientated curriculum and more diverse education pathways would definitely help develop children's well-being."

Of course, we cannot extrapolate the findings from Hong Kong lock, stock and barrel into our local context, but these are definitely lessons to be learnt.

Society as a whole needs an overhaul and reboot of our value systems and to embrace diversity of vocations and the intrinsic value of a person irrespective of class or education level. Government systems need to be in place to make education accessible to all as advocated by Unesco and Unicef's Human Rights-Based Approach to Education that spells out obligations to, among others:

1. Provide (up till) higher educa-

tion that is accessible on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;

2. Provide accessible educational and vocational information and guidance; and

3. Provide education on the basis of equal opportunity.

While we collectively try to get our acts together, some simple yet potentially life-saving steps can be learnt and carried out by each and everyone of us.

A. Be a gatekeeper in our family, social and professional networks, and community (adapted from Owens et al. 2019: <https://bit.ly/26jKBvD>).

1. Be available and ready to listen to someone who has expressed hopelessness/worthlessness, or that life is meaningless, e.g. "I can't go on anymore" or "There is no way out".

2. Ask calmly and clearly: "Have you had any thoughts of ending your life?" A common worry is whether asking someone about suicide will put that idea in their head. The fact is that if someone is suicidal, the idea is already there. If the person is not suicidal, asking them the question sensitively will not bring harm.

3. Take the person seriously, no matter how young they are; and

4. Be prepared to be by their side and offer to accompany them to seek professional help.

People who are in a suicidal crisis are often not completely sure about wanting to die but instead wish to escape the situation that is perceived to be painful, intolerable or inescapable. Many people in a suicidal crisis recover with proper treatment and support.

B. Be a safe messenger in the media (<https://bbc.in/2YyXCTM>).

Respond with care and responsibility when someone shares that they are suicidal on social media. Report the post; for example, on

Instagram, select "report" followed by "it's inappropriate" and "self-harm". Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook have mechanisms in place to offer some support, i.e. encouraging the person to reach out for help from their networks, as well as helplines for professional support.

Contact the person who did the posting if you know them, and put them in touch with helplines. If the person seems to be in imminent danger of suicide, international suicide prevention organisations recommend calling emergency services. This is tricky in our local context as we have yet to have systematic mental health crisis response teams that are streamlined with helplines to respond to someone in a suicidal crisis in the community. 247

Refrain from writing (professionally or personally), sensationalising or making viral reports of suicide with explicit and graphic details, especially on methods and location, as these can be very distressing and triggering for people who already have other vulnerabilities to suicide. Such unsafe messaging may further increase the risk of suicide.

Share stories of recovery, for example how people cope when they are suicidal and what has helped them in their journey of recovery (minus the harmful details of methods and graphics).

Let us be mindful that every life is precious and continue to support those who have lost friends and loved ones to suicide. Together, we can play our part and make a difference in saving lives.

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