The international theme for World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD) 2015 is “Preventing Suicide: Reaching Out and Saving Lives.”

Reaching out, as many of us know, is easier said than done. People at risk of suicide are sometimes reaching out for help from the last of their reserves. How do we get to this point? And how can we invest in ourselves and in our own personal mental health, on an ongoing basis to better weather these times and strengthen ourselves?

Here at the Centre for Suicide Prevention (CSP) we have been using a “Passport for Living” metaphor to symbolize the healthy activities and lifestyles in which we engage as solid suicide prevention practices: protective factors. When our passport is full and active we know we are keeping our own mental health in check and are better able to reach out and connect with others whose passports may not be as complete and current.

We believe that a daily agenda chock-full of positive thoughts and life-affirming actions is a self-empowering approach to mental health that begins with the individual and can sometimes extend to fellow-travellers. Check out our 2015 Annual Report here, where we expand on this theme: click here for Annual Report weblink.

It is also our take on this year’s theme for 2015 WSPD. Click here to download your personal passport to track your healthy mental health, your personal collective of ‘protective factors’: http://bit.ly/Passport4LB.

Protective factors - which we gain as we grow - act as defenses against the stresses of living and allow us to live full and enjoyable lives. They are key elements to ensuring that our passports are valid, that we have all our necessary vaccinations, our itinerary is in order, and we are well-prepared to have a healthy, safe, and meaningful trip through life.

Most suicide prevention research, as well as clinical practice, focuses on the vulnerabilities of suicidal individuals. This approach includes both identifying common features and assessing if someone may be at risk. There is a growing emphasis on the flipside, however, that consists of naming, isolating, and studying the protective factors that help insulate us from suicidality (Ames, 2015).

When people experience stressful life episodes, it can negatively affect their mental health. In addition, irregularities in brain chemistry and genetic predispositions to mental illness can also place an individual’s mental health in danger.
well-being at risk. At times these factors can create enormous hurdles that no amount of protective insulation can overcome. However, more and more research has shown that developing a healthy inventory of protective factors can do a great deal to prevent - or at least offset - potential and actual adverse experiences (O’Connor, 2007).

These protective factors also help those of us who have been either exposed to traumatic events or have had experiences which may make us vulnerable to mental illness or suicide.

We will look at various protective factors in this column: those that we acquire through our lived experiences and through social supports, which can help prevent both mental illness and thoughts of suicide from developing in the first place. We will also look at how our healthy actions and positive thoughts, and the choices we make, can be protective factors, too. This can lead to a lifetime of self-discovery, which becomes a healthy model for living.

SOCIAL SUPPORTS

We have known for decades that people who have membership in a community - and feel as if they are a valuable and truly connected member of that community - tend to lead healthier and more stable lives. Nineteenth century sociologist Emile Durkheim believed that in order for someone to be well-adjusted and healthy, s/he had to be well-integrated into society. He further stated that someone lacking social supports and a sense of belongingness was at a much greater risk for suicide (Durkheim, 2006/1897).

Social supports that make someone feel loved, respected, esteemed, and strongly connected to others are very important protective factors (Kleiman and Liu, 2013). Social supports can stem from one’s family, schoolmates, romantic relationships, work colleagues, religious or community organizations: whomever someone interacts with in meaningful ways.

The importance that having a supportive family has on a person’s mental health development cannot be overstated. All too often we hear about the opposite effects – mainly the dire consequences that befall people who were brought up in a dysfunctional family environment. Originally published in 1998, the influential Adverse Child Experiences (ACE) study detailed the extensive impact that a traumatic childhood can have on later life experiences. Read about it here: click here for weblink

More and more studies are emphasizing the long-term consequences that trauma, including early childhood trauma, can have on future behaviours. It is also established that the more solid protective factors that we possess will increase our abilities to overcome such traumatic episodes. Read more about trauma here: click here for weblink

Ideally, a loving, nurturing, and supportive family is the bedrock of future stability. This domestic support prepares us for our introduction to the school environment and for the greater world beyond that.

As we grow, most of us develop an essential quality called resiliency. Osman, et al. defined this as “the perceived abilities, resources and competence to regulate suicide-related thoughts, feelings, and attitudes” (p.1351). Resiliency results from the interplay and overlap of all the other protective factors working in our lives.

Schools are where many of our first strong friendships are formed. The satisfaction of academic achievements, the formation of significant relationships with adults (apart from our parents), and the pursuit of extracurricular activities are some of the areas where we develop our social skills and sense of individuality (DeMaso, 2006).

Religion and spirituality are also often cited as strong protective factors. There is substantial literature that connects religion and spirituality to positive physical and mental health (Kyle, 2013). These factors help many people find greater meaning in their lives, and also offer moral instruction against issues such as suicide. The social benefits of being a member of a religious group are very significant, as they provide individuals with a strong bond to a like-minded community (Nelson, et al., 2012). Individuals who have no religious affiliations can often get similar positive benefits from involvement in secular areas such as civic and community involvement,
mutual support groups, fraternal organizations, or any other social group with which they feel comfortable. Participating in social activity and interacting with others provides a sense of connectedness and belonging that cannot be underestimated.

Researchers have found a direct relationship between people who have a strong social network and a lower occurrence of suicidal ideation. Additionally, certain studies have found that social supports are protective against suicide in the presence of risk factors such as negative life events (Kleiman and Liu, 2013). There are, however, others who warn that negative social ties can serve to spread suicidal behaviors, and also influence phenomena such as suicidal contagion (Mueller, 2015). Certainly many individuals (often young people) may be susceptible to either good or bad ideas that are spread by their involvement in social networks. But we believe the benefits of socially connecting with others far outweigh any possible negative consequences.

HEALTHY ACTIONS

How we think and act and the lifestyle choices that we make can also affect the development of protective factors in our lives.

We can play an active role in determining our own mental wellness by becoming informed and empowered. We can also choose activities and practices that both improve our lives and help direct the course of our lived experiences.

Physical activity is one such choice as there is a documented, positive relationship between exercise and psychological health. Exercise promotes positive emotional well-being, a reduction in anxiety and stress, a positive self-image and increased self-esteem (Taliaferro, 2009). Increased production of the hormone serotonin, as a result of exercise, has been shown to reduce moderate depression (Babiss and Gangwisch, 2009).

Eating a sensible diet, refraining from smoking, and using alcohol in moderation are always good lifestyle choices to make. Regular consultation with your physician regarding your health - whether mental or physical - is also recommended practice.

Some people who have endured traumatic experiences overindulge in alcohol or other substances in an attempt to numb or eliminate stressful memories by self-medicating. This coping strategy could act as a protective factor for these individuals in the short-term, but the potential damage that such indulgence can cause cannot be overlooked. It is crucial to note that the consequences of substance or alcohol abuse could include depression, anxiety, addiction and/or worsening existing mental illnesses.

“"We can play an active role in determining our own mental wellness”"

POSITIVE THOUGHTS

How we think about life can have a huge impact on how we feel as well. Some theorists believe that optimistic thinking is a hugely important protective factor.

Optimists generally attribute their negative life experiences to external forces that they can both face and overcome. Adopting healthy routines and engaging in positive thinking can also help individuals feel like they are in control of their lives. These positive patterns of thought can act as an effective barrier against moderate levels of trauma. Nurturing self-confidence, setting and achieving personal goals, and thinking positively about the future are also characteristics of optimistic thinking (O’Connor & Cassidy, 2007).

Adherents of “Positive Psychology”, a psychological theory and practice, places optimism as a core value. They believe that their discipline deals not only with weakness and damage, but also strength and virtue. Additionally, they stress that positive thoughts can help prevent problems such as depression, substance abuse, and even psychoses such as schizophrenia. They firmly believe that positive cognitions can act as a barrier against mental illness, and that they can dramatically improve a person’s quality of life (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).
One could rightfully ask how mere changes in thought patterns could possibly be an effective treatment for debilitating depression. How could a person suffering from this illness simply become an optimist when the mere notion of positive thoughts or actions seems impossible to them?

This quotation from a column on depression is insightful:

_I have no idea how I got over my depression. I spent a year doing the things one does: I read Feeling Good, went to therapy, got exercise, tried to eat well in the utter absence of appetite, and routinely forced myself into sympathetic company when every particle of my being—or, I suppose, every particle but one—wanted to curl up alone in the dark. I did all these things not out of any real hope that they would work but because the failure to do them seemed like it would cede more ground to the awfulness_ (Schulz, 2013).

This excerpt shows how exhausting the sometimes overwhelming effort required to accomplish a task can be, but that forcing oneself to do it (even when it seems useless) is still worth doing. It also illustrates her personal outcome of a combination of healthy life choices – we rarely find that one protective factor in isolation is enough to sustain our mental health: we need a multi-faceted approach. The opposite, caving in to the negative option and doing nothing, can continue a downward spiral of immobilizing depression, making escape from this state all the more difficult.

**SELF-DISCOVERY**

The idea that we are capable of affecting real personal change with our positive thoughts is a powerful one. But can this notion of self-help be harmful as well? Is there a point where this self-directed search for wellness can go from being protective to potentially damaging?

The self-help industry earns an estimated $12 billion dollars a year in the United States. Clearly, there is a large market for people who want to better their lives in some fashion. Critics, though, point to the predatory nature of this business, which they say is out to feed on our inherent insecurities about ourselves (Vanderkam, 2012). Similar to the advertising industry, self-help gurus have been accused of conjuring up anxieties that we as consumers soak up and internalize. They prime us to look for deficiencies in our character, and often succeed in making us feel anxious and insecure. This sets the stage for the gurus to step in and sell us the cure.

Sometimes these quests of self-discovery are never-ending, and they serve to sap both our strength and our money.

But is this soul-searching and desire for change wholly a bad thing? What is so wrong with making the proactive effort to improve our mental health or simply sustain healthy patterns of thought? If not taken to extremes of financial expenditure, these actions can nurture positive self-efficacy and demonstrate a healthy level of self-care.

The role of protective factors in strong mental health cannot be emphasized enough. Developing strong protective factors over the course of our lives not only helps shield us from negative life experiences, but can also help us realize the substantial effect that our environments and our thought patterns can have on our mental well-being.

We understand that suicide is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon. No single approach, such as mentioned above, will eradicate suicide entirely. The promotion of health living is but one way that can be used to help prevent its occurrence. If this saves even one life, it is worth the effort!

Although the voyage to sustain mental wellness may be fraught with unexplained detours and unplanned mishaps, having valid passports that are well-stamped with protective factors can outfit us with the proper safety equipment to face every challenging twist, turn, and hurdle.

For this is our life voyage. If we are actively engaged and charting our own paths, mental illness or suicidality will have less chance of darkening our personal travelogue.

Please go online for an interactive version of this article to access weblinks.

What activities help you maintain your own mental health?  
_Visit www.suicideinfo.ca to leave your comment_
REFERENCES


