

NAS Surrey Branch Meeting Report

Suicide First Aid Talk in Guildford

On Saturday 2nd March, we held a workshop on the very disturbing issue of suicidal thoughts and behaviour in people with autism of any age.

Suicide has tragically touched families in our autism community here in Surrey over the past couple of years, so we were keen to help parents understand its prevalence, what we can do to help the people we support and what we can do to get help.

The speaker was Fiona Aldred, Director of Operations at The National Centre for Suicide Prevention Training. She started by explaining that for every death by suicide, 15 people are injured by it and 134 people are affected. In 2017, 5,821 suicides were reported, but as Fiona explained, the true figure is probably higher.

Fiona explained that for most people who suicide, they want the pain to stop, rather than to die. Factors which affect a decision include biological (age, gender, sexuality etc); Psychological (depression, anxiety, low resilience, low self-esteem); past history (abuse, illness, rejection, injury) and factors in their current lives (e.g. end of a relationship, redundancy, bereavement, alcohol etc). Fiona reminded us that around 70% of autistic people have depression and almost all suffer from anxiety, making them more susceptible to thoughts of suicide.

Fiona offered tips for families who are concerned about a loved one.

- Spend a few minutes every day talking about their feelings. Define 'good' and 'bad' days with a 1 – 5 scale.
- Keep a diary of moods
- Show you recognise that something is wrong

She summarised the suicide safety guide:

STEP 1: Recognise the signs of suicide and ask

- Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, often associated with loss and alone-ness
- Thoughts and words such as "I can't take it", "I've had enough"
- Actions and behaviours such as saying goodbye, apologising for past events, withdrawing
- Life events such as rejection, loss, abuse, conviction or diagnosis

ASK clearly and directly

- "Sometimes when people say or do [the thing that has concerned you], they are having suicidal thoughts. Are you?"
- Are you having thoughts about killing yourself?

STEP 2: Explore the options, Listen and Learn

- Start a caring conversation, encourage them to let you know what is causing the pain
- Listen for reasons why they may want to stay alive. What is keeping them here?
- Let them know you have heard and understood what they have said by saying back what you've heard, so they can correct you if you are wrong.
- Explore the options together

- If they are talking to you, they have probably not fully made up their mind to die. Most people want help to stay alive.
- Acknowledge that you know suicide is an option, but that there are other options which they can talk through with someone.
- Now is not the time to make a decision. Ask them to give themselves a chance to think things through before acting.

STEP3: SAFEGUARDING Create a suicide safety plan

- If the person has already harmed themselves, you or others, call for emergency help.
- If they can communicate with you, continue with the safeguarding plan:
- Plan: do they have a plan. How can you work together to remove or disable this?
- Alcohol / Drugs / Medication – do you need to talk about how they can use these safely?
- Previous suicide behaviour – what helped last time? Can you use this help again?
- Mental Health – would medical help be useful?
- Support – who can you tell that can help them stay safe. Who would be their life-connection?

If you ask for help from a professional service, e.g. CAMHS, and they say they can't help due to the young person's autism, ask for it in writing. Complain and escalate if necessary.

Useful information and Resources:

- National Centre for Suicide Prevention Education and Training
- <http://www.suicidesaferlondon.org.uk/help-and-resources>
- Headspace Meditation App <https://www.headspace.com/>
- Kooth Online counselling kooth.com
- Clear Fear online app <https://stem4.org.uk/stem4s-new-app-clear-fear-released/>
- Youngminds <https://youngminds.org.uk/>
- The event was made possible thanks to donations made from fundraisers in memory of the late Jaz Bush
- The Government has recently published its suicide prevention plan. You can read it here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/first-ever-cross-government-suicide-prevention-plan-published>