

Hope

saves lives



Report on Bereavement Support Research

FEBRUARY 2013

Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

Hope for Life undertook research in late 2012, to identify the needs of people who have been bereaved by suicide and to gain a better understanding of their experience following the death of their loved one. This report provides an insight into some of the ways in which we can provide support to people who have been bereaved by suicide.

BACKGROUND

Hope for Life is a Salvation Army initiative and receives funding through the Department of Health and Ageing under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy to raise awareness about the impact of suicide and in particular to provide a practical response to support those who have been bereaved by suicide. The main focus of the funding has been to develop and deliver training programs to raise awareness about the issues impacting on people who have been bereaved by suicide and to up-skill members of the general community to give them the knowledge, confidence and resources that will enable them to better support bereaved people.

In addition to delivering training across the whole of Australia, Hope for Life has developed a number of initiatives that provide opportunities for bereaved people to share their lived experience to raise awareness about the impact of suicide. These include:

LIFEKEEPER MEMORY QUILT INITIATIVE

This initiative commenced in 2008, with the launch of a national Lifekeeper Memory Quilt. Sixty two families submitted a photographic tribute of their loved one who had died by suicide. The Lifekeeper Memory Quilt has two objectives, the primary objective being to provide a sensitive and fitting memorial to enable bereaved families to celebrate the lives of their loved ones and remember the life lived. Secondly the Lifekeeper Memory Quilt provides the opportunity to raise awareness about the impact of suicide. By putting a face to the statistics, we start to realise the enormity of suicide and the fact that suicide transcends all borders; it affects people from all walks of life, all age groups, all ethnic background, people from different socio economic groups and it affects both male and female members of our community. Suicide can happen in any family and any community and raising awareness of the issues can assist in suicide prevention. In addition to the National Lifekeeper Memory Quilt, Hope for Life has developed five State based Quilts and these are available for specific community events aimed at raising awareness about suicide prevention and postvention.

POSTVENTION CONFERENCE

Hope for Life has facilitated three Suicide Postvention Conferences, in 2008, 2010 and 2012. These conferences provide the opportunity to bring together Australian and international experts in the area of suicide bereavement, to share their knowledge and professional expertise as well as providing specific information about program developments. The conferences also provide the opportunity to listen to the voice of the bereaved and to develop our practice wisdom based on the lived experience. Bereaved people are encouraged and supported to attend these conferences, which always feature a sensitive and thoughtful Remembrance Ceremony to remember friends and loved ones who have died.

BEREAVED FAMILIES DVD

The Bereaved Families DVD presents the stories of four families who have been bereaved by suicide. In each instance, the story includes one or both parents talking about the experience of hearing about the death of their child and the follow up process. They each speak of their personal tragedy and the journey of extreme grief, prejudice and stigma that is often associated with suicide. They share candidly their experience of the responses of family members, paramedics, hospitals, police and the Coroner's Office, the support offered to help them and in some cases the lack of support and the frustration they endure.

HEALING AND REMEMBRANCE SERVICES

Hope for Life understands the importance of Healing and Remembrance Services as a way of supporting bereaved people to express their grief and to pay tribute to their loved ones. We provide resources to various community groups (e.g. churches groups) that might be interested in reaching out to bereaved people within their community through hosting special healing and remembrance services.

SUMMARY

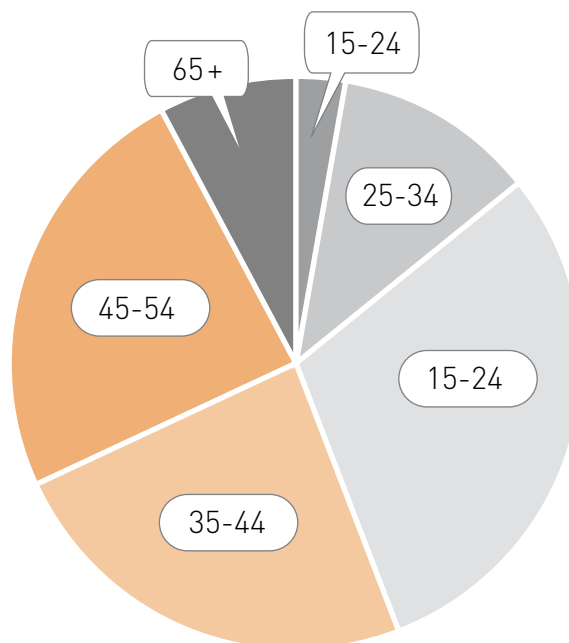
These initiatives have enabled us to engage with bereaved people and to gain a deeper understanding of the issues that impact on them. It is also our intention to provide the opportunity for bereaved people to provide feedback that will facilitate the ongoing development of programs and supports that meet their needs.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY


The research methodology involved a short questionnaire sent to seventy three people with and fifty three people (73%) responded to the survey. The respondents spanned a broad age group range with the majority of respondents (71%) being under the age of 54 years with the largest age group range in the survey being 35- 44 years (30%). All the respondents to the survey confirmed that they had been bereaved by suicide.

Age Group of Respondents



RESEARCH FINDINGS

The short survey provides useful information on how to respond to people who have been bereaved by suicide. As stated by many of the people in this survey, they did not know that assistance and support was available following a suicide bereavement and many of them faced their grief and confusion alone. Many felt they would have benefited greatly from peer support groups and attending remembrance ceremonies, had they known these were available. The key message for organisations delivering support in the area of suicide postvention is to ensure that they are informed about all the support services available to the bereaved. Moreover, we cannot over emphasise the importance of fostering effective collaborations with other organisations within the sector and collectively promoting awareness about services that area available and the issues impacting upon the bereaved.

A black lanyard is attached to a silver metal hook, which is connected to a white rectangular badge with a grey border. The badge lists several activities in orange, bold, uppercase text, separated by horizontal lines.

KEY NOTE SESSIONS

**MEETING OTHER
BEREAVED PEOPLE**

**HEALING AND
REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY**

**HEARING THE STORIES
OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE
BEEN BEREAVED**

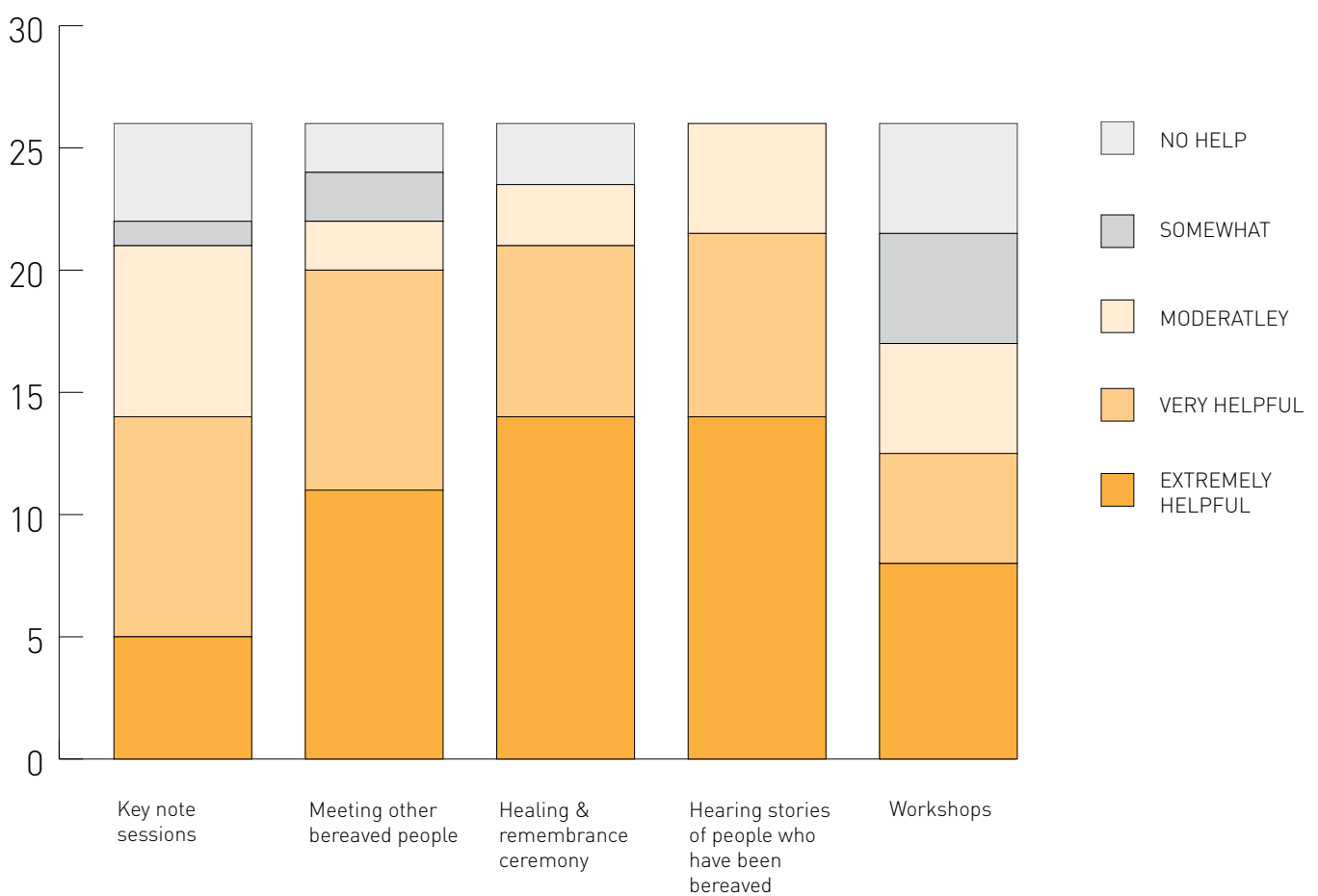
WORKSHOPS

POSTVENTION CONFERENCE

The first set of questions in the survey related to the Postvention Conference held in Sydney in June 2012. Just over half (57%) of the respondents attended the Postvention Conference with 65% stating that they found attending the conference to be very valuable and 45% stating that they found it somewhat valuable.

The conference included a Healing and Remembrance Ceremony, which involved the launch of five state quilts and a number of bereaved families attended the conference specifically to participate in this ceremony. A special focus of the 2012 Conference was the 'lived experience' of people who have been intimately affected by a suicide death. Several people were invited to share their stories in each of the conference plenary sessions. The Healing and Remembrance Ceremony and hearing from people who have experienced the loss of a loved one by suicide, were regarded as the most helpful elements of the conference. Whilst some survey respondents found the key-note sessions and workshops helpful, others did not gain any benefit from attending these.

What specific aspects of the conference have you found to be most helpful?



It is apparent that 'meeting other bereaved people' the 'healing and remembrance ceremony' and 'hearing stories of people who have been bereaved' were seen to be the most helpful to the bereaved who attended the conference.

The following is a sample of some of the comments from bereaved people who attended the conference:

'This was my first conference and I think it was very valuable in helping me deal with grief which had been locked away from over 20 years and meeting others who had also lost their mother to suicide.'

'My husband and I only attended the last day of the conference. We saw many bereaved people, especially when the quilt was unveiled and during the Healing and Remembrance ceremony. We did not meet any of these people personally. Maybe it would have been helpful to meet some of the bereaved people who are like us. Our feelings and grief were still very raw, as our son had died only 8 months prior to the conference.'

'This conference was extremely helpful in everyway; the memorial service beautiful and comforting.'

'I think that the quilts should have been unveiled early in the conference so that they provided a backdrop to speakers throughout the conference each day. They looked beautiful on the last day.'

'Spent most of my time speaking with another bereaved wife which turned out to be invaluable in itself as I was a fairly recently bereaved wife myself and found it extremely helpful to know another wife.'

'I only attended the Conference on Saturday 30 June. My son is on the Lifekeeper Memory Quilt. I did attend for 3 days at the Inaugural Conference at the same venue. I did not attend any workshops or key-note sessions preferring to mix with other bereaved people. I have had to tick no help for item 1, 3 & 5 or I can't go on. Future surveys may include a NA box.'

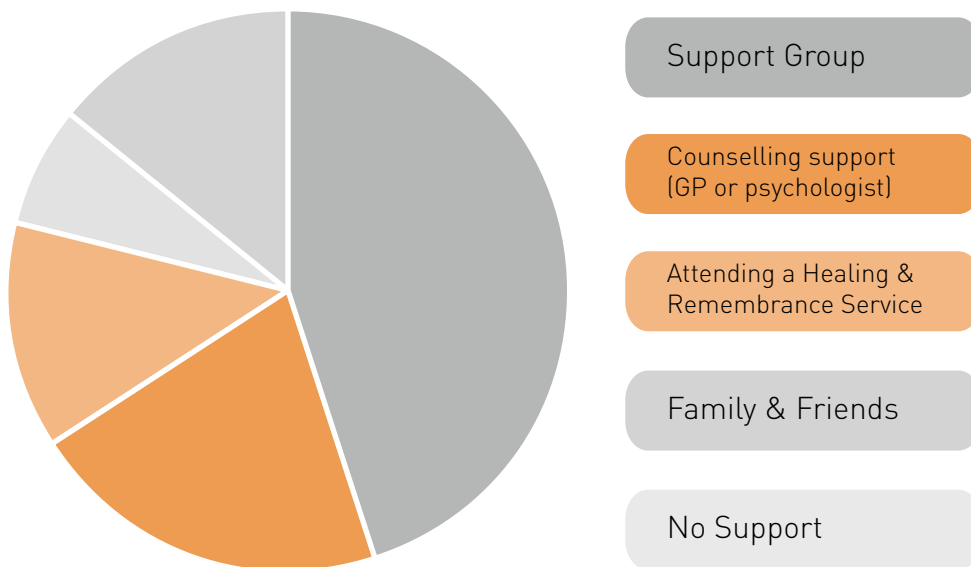
'I scored "Meeting other bereaved people" as only somewhat helpful, as this is something I generally find very helpful, but I didn't meet other bereaved people, other than those I already knew, on the day.'

HELPFUL SUPPORT FOLLOWING A SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT

Respondents were asked about the type of support that they found most helpful to them following a suicide bereavement. The majority of survey respondents (45%) stated that they found attending a support group to be most beneficial to them following the death of their loved one. A significant number of respondents (21%) sought counselling from either their local General Practitioner, a Psychologist or a specialised grief counsellor; some of these respondents also attended a support group.

There are an increasing number of opportunities for people who have been bereaved by suicide to attend a Healing and Remembrance Service, to pay tribute to their loved one and to remember the life they lived. Thirteen per cent of survey respondents stated that they found this to be helpful to them in their grief journey. Friends and family members are a crucial part of the support people need during times of devastating grief; we cannot overstate the importance of the important role played by caring individuals during times of stress and sadness. Someone who understands, who listens non-judgementally, who cares unconditionally and who is prepared to just be there.

Helpful Support Following a Suicide Bereavement

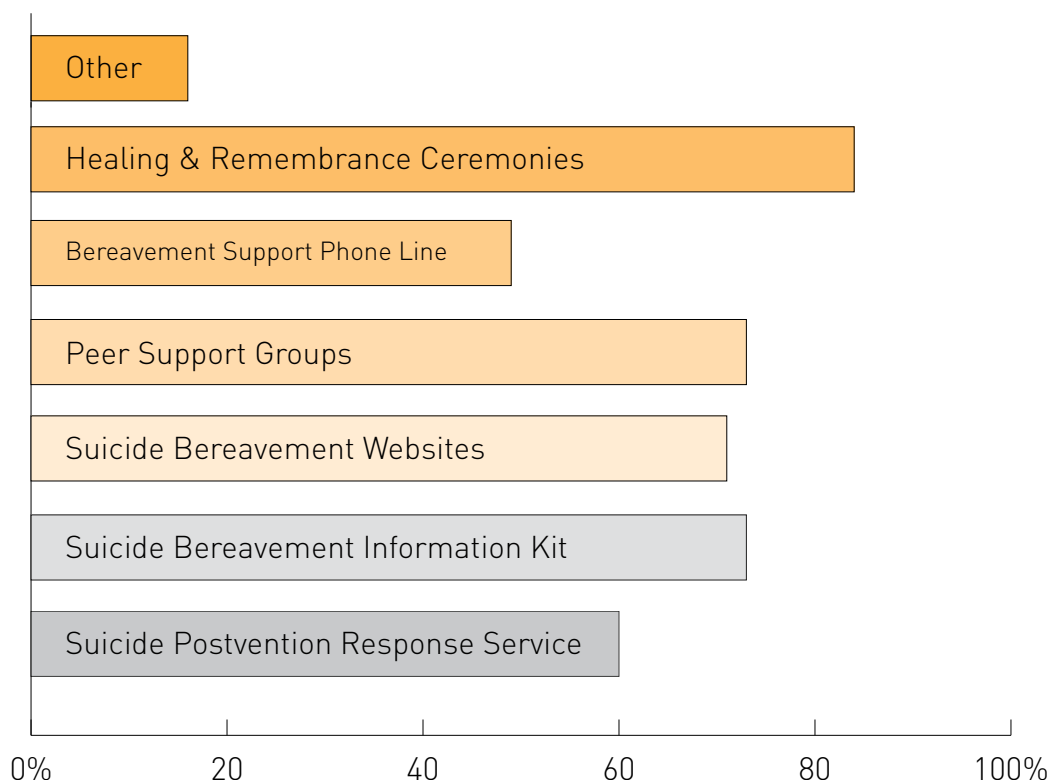


Sadly for some of the respondents (14%) to our survey, there was no support available to them when their loved one died.

PREFERRED SUPPORT SERVICES

The survey also canvassed the type of support services that people bereaved by suicide, might access. Six specific types of bereavement support services were listed in the survey and respondents were able to list all the services that they felt would be helpful following a bereavement. Further respondents were given the option to suggest other types of services that they would like to see made available. A significant majority of people (84%) said that Healing and Remembrance services are important support to them in their grief journey. People who have been bereaved by suicide find comfort in talking to people who understand what they are going through and Peer Support Groups provide the opportunity to meet with people who have had similar experiences. In the Hope for Life survey, 73% of respondents said that they would, and in fact many have, accessed Peer Support Groups.

Support Services that bereaved people would likely access



The shock of a suicide death can leave people numb, disoriented, bewildered and confused. It is important to provide them with information about services that are available and to connect them with people who can assist them through the many practical matters that need to be attended to following the death of a loved one. Suicide prevention and postvention web sites as well as specific Information Kits are ways in which people can become informed about the myriad of issues that they have to deal with. People who have experienced a suicide bereavement talk about financial pressures and the need to understand how to rearrange their financial affairs; they also need legal assistance to work through issues such as probate, frozen assets, wills, mortgages and property matters, insurance claims and various other issues.

Other helpful measures that respondents to the Hope for Life survey mentioned were:

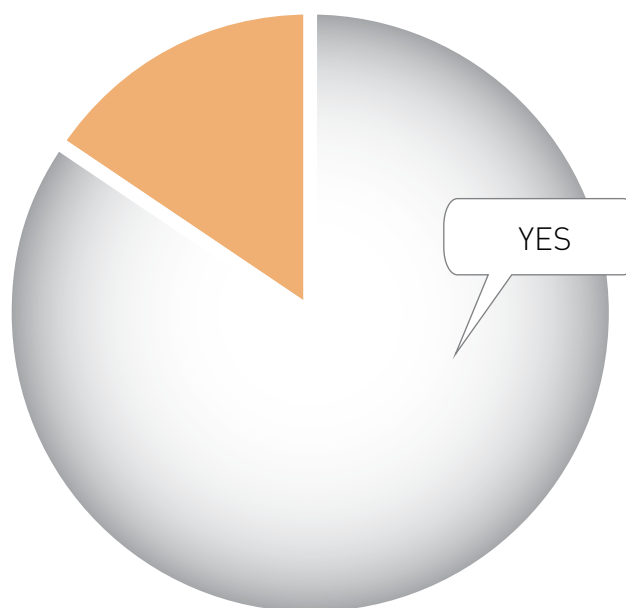
- Regularly accessible and affordable private grief counselling
- Structured closed support groups and workshops
- Memorial walks and events on occasions such as World Suicide Prevention Day

Finally, a number of people spoke about the importance of providing support for children, who may have lost either a parent, a sibling, other family member or a friend. They need access to information and workshops where they can express their feelings and meet with other children in a peer support or sibling support group.

ESTABLISHING A SUICIDE BEREAVEMENT ASSOCIATION

One of the outcomes from the postvention conference was the recommendation that an Australian Suicide Bereavement Association be established, to give people who have been bereaved by suicide a voice in the development of policy and programs. In the research questionnaire, we asked bereaved people if they believed that this type of initiative was needed and whether they would be interested in participating in such an association. The majority of respondents (84%) indicated that they would be interested in being part of this type of initiative.

Q. Would you be interested in participating in a National Association for the Bereaved?



ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS THAT ARE NEEDED

We asked respondents to provide any suggestions on how government and/or community groups can better support people who have been bereaved by suicide. The following is a summary of some of the ideas that were put forward by respondents:

Schools Programs

A number of respondents commented on the significant number of young people represented on the Lifekeeper Memory quilt and stated that we need more suicide prevention programs in schools as well as supports for the teenagers who need support but don't engage with the formal structures.

Counselling Support

Many respondents spoke of the beneficial effect of grief counselling and suggested that financial support needs to be made available to assist bereaved people in accessing this for as long as it's needed. Special attention needs to be given to making this available in rural areas.

Rural and Regional Support Programmes

A significant number of respondents spoke about the need to ensure that services are accessible to people living in rural and regional areas.

Funding for Support Groups

The importance of support groups, was raised by the majority of respondents and many people spoke of the need to provide funding to these groups. Comments such as :

'Funding is needed for professional workers to assist support groups run by those bereaved by suicide.'

'We need more small support groups that are structured and help people to work through different steps and then more wider group support systems for everyone.'

'I believe support groups are truly important but there is so much red tape now to get anything up and running especially with insurance. I think the Government could do a lot more in helping especially people who have been bereaved and find it financially impossible to go these functions. I do believe they can be a lot more supportive.'

'It is important to maintain funding for support groups even when there is a drop in numbers, these groups are critical for people who have been bereaved.'

Resources

Respondents spoke of the need to provide resources such as newsletters to ensure that bereaved people are informed of events. One suggestion included a 'Handbook' for families and friends of those bereaved by suicide that lists the community resources available. This could be provided through the local council, police, funeral directors and Centrelink.

Training for Health Professionals

All respondents acknowledged the importance of health professionals and called for ongoing training for General Practitioners to ensure that they remain vigilant about potential suicide risks. The suggestion was made to introduce bereavement support programs into the public hospital system.

First Responders Peer Support

Several respondents discussed the need for a chaplain to be available to provide support to the family. Chaplains often accompany police when they go to notify the family of a suicide death. Families suggested that this could be formalised and a funded 'chaplaincy first responder team' could provide ongoing support to families, including being present at the funeral. One respondent stated,

'I personally found the chaplain being at the search site and giving me a card was the most helpful bit of information.'



Awareness Raising

All respondents spoke of the need to continue to raise awareness about the incidence and impact of suicide in our community. Several referred to the high profile given to reducing the national road toll and yet most of the community would be unaware that more people die by suicide in Australia each year, than die in road accidents.

Many referred to the important role that the media can play in heightening awareness in the community. One person commented that 'programs shown recently on the ABC and SBS Television channels have opened minds and hearts to prevalence of suicide and alleviated the problem of stigma'. Respondents spoke about the use of social media in raising awareness, the following is a representative sample of the comments from respondents:

'In some ways I feel that suicide needs to attract the attention that road deaths do, however this needs to be done in a way that does not promote suicide as an option for others.'

'We need more gatherings/rallies/walks etc to raise awareness.'

'I think the first step is to increase the "profile", e.g. to have a "death toll", similar to the "road toll" and that way get the populations' attention (e.g. then get the government and community to tackle the issues and support services would flow from this. Bring the statistics out that e.g. the suicide rate is 10 times the road toll but how many know this?'

'There should be more advertising on TV, on mainstream websites such as Sydney Morning Herald, News.com.au, Yahoo etc so really build the profile of these services. Also they should be provided on the spot to those who have lost someone to suicide when the police/medical arrive at the scene.'

'We should focus on raising awareness through council campaigns, websites, community fundraising, musical concert with celebrities raising awareness, asking large corporations to donate food, clothes, financial services whatever they can to assist with the rebuilding of a families life.'

'Stop hiding the issues and keep on displaying all the support that there is available to everyone.'

'Yes, make suicide more out there in the general community rather than covering it up and not wanting to offend people who do not want to know about it. It is ordinary people that have to suffer from suicide, the loss of a love one is a suffering to be endured for the rest of ones life. Suicide is real and needs to be understood in the community that it can happen and what it does to a family.'

Social Inclusion

Respondents commented on the social isolation that they felt following the death of their loved ones. The suggestion was made that community groups can do small things very gently and respond to people's needs. It was suggested that community events that are relatively inexpensive are ways in which bereaved people can reconnect with community life. One respondent spoke about the need to befriend bereaved people and encourage them to become involved. Another spoke of the need to provide assistance and advice in respect to financial issues, particularly following the loss of a spouse, this respondent stated:

'In my case I had just started a new job and had to push myself through my work as I wasn't able to have time off because I was the only one able to do my job. A year later I quit because it got too hard and I wasn't able to be there for my kids as much as I would have preferred.'

CONCLUSION

The outcome of this research confirms that there is much that the community can do to support people who have been bereaved by suicide. We don't have to be professional counsellors or specialists in suicide postvention. People need to feel accepted, they need a listening ear, they need people who respect and value them and who can simply be there as a support.

The Living Hope Bereavement Support program is a two day training course that is provided free to any group throughout Australia who want to know how they might become involved in suicide prevention and supporting people who have been bereaved by suicide. We encourage you to contact Hope for Life or visit our web site to find out more about this training. By becoming informed and developing confidence you can help save lives.

For more information please contact

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