

Perceptions of Familial Support Around Suicidal Crises: Missing the Mark

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New Agenda for Suicide Research

Understand suicidality from the perspective of people with lived experience

Understand suicidality with mixed methods and qualitative research

My project addresses both of these aims.

My focus:

- Understanding suicide from the perspective of those who have lived experience
- The role of family in resiliency/recovery from suicidality
- The most significant barriers for seeking help or getting support for suicidality

Research Questions

What are the factors that formerly suicidal individuals perceived as contributing to their resiliency or ongoing distress?

What role do family members play in living through experiences feeling suicidal?

Qualitative Methodology and Data Sample

- 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, 60-90 minutes each
- Respondents:
 - Identified as formerly suicidal
 - Respondents had contemplated or attempted suicide at some point in their past.
 - Ages 22-65 years (required minimum: 18 years old)
 - Median: 35.5 years old
 - Predominantly female identified
 - 3 males (15%), 16 females (80%), 1 identified as gender-fluid (5%)
 - Majority white respondents (90%)
- All respondents are referred by a **pseudonym** to protect their privacy.

Finding #1:

Two durations of suicidal feelings

➤ FULLY RECOVERED (N=10)

➤ *I decided that I would stop trying to end my life.... That was clearly a decision where it was like, 'okay, that's not going to work, so, why don't I try to have this life.' And what I remember thinking was, 'I'll just have a different life. I'll just create a different life for myself,' [and then I was like], 'really, I don't want to have a separate life. I just want to have one life.' Again, it was kind of those moments at which you, I don't know that I can fully understand them, but they've been very, very important for me, in terms of recovery. [And later when] there were things that worried me about my own behavior, now it's a much more public conversation, and I'm much more willing to say, 'I am overwhelmed and I have to stop.' –Maureen*

Finding #1: Two durations of suicidal feelings

➤ ONGOING SUICIDALITY (N=10)

➤ *I still have suicidal thoughts. You know, it's something that I live with. When life gets a bit rough, my initial thoughts turn to suicide. And then, you know, I sort of slap myself around and say, 'where the hell did that come from?' There are some of us that just don't necessarily feel as if we belong, and so, it's hard, not necessarily enjoying life. –Nathan*

Finding #2: Feeling misunderstood

➤ *You know, through my two attempts, I was thinking, you know, 'I love my family, and I hate the fact that I have to do this to my family. But, it's something I need to do.' It was something I needed to do. I felt like I needed to do it. You know, what if people say, 'yea, well, you needed to do it to your family, so it was a selfish move.' And I'm like, 'no, it was a very difficult move.' You know, I'm not going to do it with, well, yea, part of it is trying to help me, but that's the least of my concerns in that moment. –Tim*

Finding #3: Families perpetuating stigma

➤ *I think some of the things that led me to make attempts were feeling very isolated, and lonely, and misunderstood. Like, I had been really rejected by people; I had some family estrangement, like from some of my extended family members, and also some friends rejected me, and that was all very difficult... I know other factors played into it, social factors, including, like, financial issues or social rejection, and that kind of thing, having insecurity. Things like that would make it difficult, and feed into a suicidal crisis. –Elise*

Finding #4: Desire to talk about suicide with family

➤ *I think that they are afraid of it. I think that's always been the case. Like, maybe it is immediately after the attempt when I'm still depressed, and maybe still feeling suicidal, but I mean, years down the road, after I've recovered? I've stopped. And I'm able to talk about it. And I want to talk about it. –Elise*

Finding #5: The power of familial support

➤ *They were always super protective and supportive of me, like, even when I had to seek treatment. And, I had a mini-relapse I guess recently, and my dad immediately did all the things. He came to pick me up. I mean, my family is really close. My parents are there for me. That's not ever going to change. Like, I can definitely say that, for my dad, the thing that he holds most dearly is his children. That's always been a big thing, which is like we're a masterpiece, or whatever. Like, we are always going to be on this pedestal, and he is always going to help us out. So, for the longest amount of time, I was never willing to seek help. I always wanted to do everything by myself. I was also really embarrassed about everything that I was going through. I didn't think people would understand. But in college I figured out that you can't really do it by yourself. If you need help, then you need to let your guard down essentially and be like, 'I need help.' Otherwise, or at least from what I've learned, you're never going to like truly grow, and figure out like what all, I mean, all the things that you need to tackle I guess. So, that's how my family dynamic is.*
—Andrew

Implications: Families matter

- *I continued going to counseling and trying out different medications and stuff. But, you know, we never sat down and talked about it. And they never went to counseling. And maybe my dad and my step-mom talked about it, but I don't know. There were a few relatives that knew, but pretty much it was just like forgetting that it happened I guess. It was sort of like I brought shame upon my family and stuff like that. –Danielle*
- Families need support too!
 - Intervention efforts
 - Strategies for help-seeking
 - Anti-stigma initiatives

Thank you for your time and interest.

I welcome your comments, questions, and feedback:

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