

JEVI Foundation for the Prevention of Suicide among Youth

Claude Thibault, co-founder.

For many years I have been involved in the prevention of suicide among youth; it has enabled me to share their projects, dreams as well as despair. Although sometimes I have witnessed their fragility, I have come to realize at the same time that adolescents also have an amazing power.

As a founding member of JEVI Foundation for the Prevention of Suicide among Youth, I think it is important to take action individually and collectively to break this wall of despair behind which too many adolescents hide to die.

The problem of suicide among youth

We can identify some factors that increase the vulnerability to suicide:

- social isolation,
- the importance given to performance,
- uncertainty for the future,
- family problems,
- feeling of exclusion from collective projects, etc.

We can also identify precipitating factors:

- break-up in love relationship,
- academic failure,
- tension with parents,
- rejection by friends,
- bereavement and other losses, etc.

When we look more closely at these factors, we could conclude that this is a problem of the adolescent himself and also of the society in which he lives. Therefore, it is via concerted community action that the problem will partly be resolved. Moreover, some of those who commit suicide make their intentions known to others beforehand. In this case, either we cannot decode their messages, either we are not able to offer the appropriate resources they need.

To understand and to identify the risk factors involved means to become capable of committing ourselves to a process of change. But no change occurs by itself; and existing specific resources are generally not sufficient and sometimes lack cohesiveness. Furthermore, no thorough change will occur if action is not rooted in prevention first.

An environment that becomes more significant and nurturing generally creates changes which, with time, favour a new vision on life. Youth need more and more to know and hear people say and demonstrate by their actions that life has meaning and is worth while. Yet we must help them realize that this is possible and that, in the end, it is a challenge they are capable of facing.

History of JEVI Foundation

In 1984, a small group of people started a suicide prevention project in a Sherbrooke high school (province of Québec). After several consultations to better define the problem, the group decided to develop actions that were likely to get to the very root of the problem. Via an approach focusing on promotion and prevention, the pilot project grew in a school that quickly became the laboratory of our first activities: setting-up a support group and an action group; information and sensitization workshops for students, staff and parents; development of natural helpers groups; holding of the first Semaine du Mieux-Vivre (week for life) in May 1985.

Gradually those involved understood that preventing suicide from a long-term perspective was not only about preventing youth from dying, but also about helping them to choose life. But to choose life, life must have meaning. Consequently, adolescents must have a feeling of power over what is happening. It is important for them to realize that they are not only part of the problem but that they can be involved in the search for solutions.

During the fall of 1986, several schools the region began to show interest in our activities. But the most significant boost came when the Canadian Federation of Teachers acknowledged the innovative and dynamic nature of the project by awarding us the first National Hilroy bursary. This recognition allowed our pilot project to go beyond the local frontiers.

By then, we had to consolidate the actions, set up an organization and to plan appropriate financial and human resources to ensure our mission. Out of these concern came the JEVI Foundation for the prevention of suicide among youth in 1986.

Levels of action

Four levels of action are recognized: promotion, prevention, intervention and postvention.

Promotion is directed towards the general population. The aim is to increase the well-being of youth and their family. We work on the determinants of health, more than on risks factors:

- improving family relations and parenting skills,
- improving individual skills , self-esteem,
- developing social networks,
- promoting community participation,
- promoting education.

Prevention is aimed at reducing suicidal events by addressing the risk factors and those exposed to them.

Intervention is aimed at identifying those experiencing suicidal ideation, reducing the intensity of a suicidal crisis and supporting those around the adolescent.

Postvention is aimed at preventing another attempt or at supporting those left after a suicide.

The originality of JEVI programs is based on three main elements: its specific clientele, that is youth in a school environment; its philosophy that is based on the value of life; and its action that

relies heavily on mutual help.

It is at the mental health level that JEVl chose to work by emphasizing protective factors. Actions are aimed at developing the ability of teenagers to face life's difficulties, at using their inner strength while accepting error and failure, at reinforcing their social networks. Our adolescents are not only preparing for the future but they are also at the heart of the present; they can individually and collectively become agents of change in their respective environment.

Services for youth

JEVI programs for youth are as follows:

1- Sensitization. The objectives are to: sensitize and provide information on the myths and realities of suicide, promote detection, introduce helping relationships. The means are: information session - workshop - theatre creation, etc.

2- Mutual help. The objective is to train peer counsellors.

3- Animation. The objectives are to stimulate creativity and involvement, let young people express themselves. The means are: the Semaine du Mieux-Vivre (week for life) - creation through theatre, etc.

4- Intervention/referral. JEVl is not a crisis centre, but adolescents and parents who have problems are welcomed and referred to appropriate resources.

Services for educators

Although youth are important in JEVl activities, educators are also indispensable collaborators.

There are three JEVl programs for educators: 1) Sensitization; 2) Training: how to prevent suicide; how to set up a peer counsellor group; how to set up a prevention program in school and 3) Educational support (different kits).

Networking and research

The Foundation is also actively involved with organizations concerned with the problem of suicide and the problems of adolescents in general. The Foundation staff makes presentations at different meetings and regularly gives interviews to the media.

A research project on the impact of the Semaine du Mieux-Vivre was made public and reveals the positive effects of such an activity. A study developed by Sherbrooke University students analyzed data concerning youth's views on suicide; it enabled us to better organize our future activities.

"Life... is for life"

Although during the previous years, numerous reports and studies on the prevention of suicide among youth have been published, and although a lot has been said, we sometimes have the

feeling that everything has yet to be done.

"Life... is for life", said a 16 year-old student who had attempted a suicide. Why not listen to her and to others who can no longer speak.

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