Connecting with People and Person-centred Mental Health Care

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A key feature of mental health care in South Australia is the coming together of person-centred mental health care and the Connecting with People approach to suicide prevention. The purpose of this supplement is to briefly overview key elements of both with a view to explicate nursing practice that is person-centred. As mental health nurses continually move toward advancing person-centred and recovery based practice, the interface with the Connecting with People approach is worthy of closer examination. This approach further aligns with NSQHS Standard 5: Comprehensive Care, the South Australian Suicide Prevention Plan 2017–2021 and the development of a person and family centred guideline as part of the current Central Adelaide Local Health Network BPSO Project.

Connecting with People is an internationally recognised suicide and self-harm mitigation and prevention program built upon best available evidence in the field of suicide prevention. In 2017 Dr Alys Cole-King, originator of the Connecting with People approach was recipient of the Ringel Service Award from the International Association for Suicide Prevention. This award is for distinguished service in the field of suicidology, presented to individuals who have been involved in the development and implementation of evidence-informed and best practice suicide prevention and are acknowledged as a leader in the field as confirmed by opinion leaders (in academic, practitioner, voluntary and/or community sectors) nationally and internationally. As a training program the Connecting with People approach is designed for use by SA Health and its partners to assist individuals vulnerable to, and/or experiencing suicide related distress. It is situated on the premise that suicide is preventable and can be mitigated when clinicians have the appropriate knowledge, attitudes, skills and confidence and access to tools for intervention.

Person-centred mental health care is marked by practitioners taking active steps to convey a holistic approach with an attitude of respect. Person-centred care is widely regarded as care aligned with the unique experience and needs of the person, using their language and experience. Person-centred mental health care is aligned with the philosophy of Connecting with People as the latter places compassion, empathy and collaboration at the heart of every encounter with a person at risk of suicide. Specifically, the practice of trying to understand and respond to the person’s conceptualisation of distress. This may include sensitive inquiry into the following:

- degree of emotional pain
- feeling overwhelmed
- nature of suicidal thoughts and feelings
- risk factors and protective factors particularly reasons for living and individual resilience
- level of emotional and social support.
The Connecting with People approach also involves the practice of safety planning. A key consideration in effective suicide prevention is having effective systems to support collaboration with consumers, carers and families to safely respond at times of distress, thoughts of self-harm or suicide, or have self-harmed. Safety planning is considered international best practice in indicated suicide prevention strategies as tools to help mitigate suicide risk. A safety plan document is co-created collaboratively by a consumer and clinician. It typically consists of written statements and sources of comfort, distraction and support that consumers can use to alleviate suicidal urges or other safety crisis. Safety planning interventions typically utilise the following six key steps: (1) recognise warning signs of an impending suicidal crisis, (2) employ internal care and coping strategies, (3) utilise social contacts as a means of support and distraction from suicidal thoughts, (4) contact family members or friends who can help resolve the crisis, (5) contact mental health professionals, and (6) reduce the potential use of lethal means. Written in the person’s own words/language, the strategies and supports are co-created with the person, not done to the person.

In summary, the Connecting with People approach is a paradigm shift in the way suicide is considered. It is marked by clinicians engaging in comprehensive person-centred assessment, safety planning and suicide mitigation with a series of evidence-informed and peer-reviewed clinical tools to support clinical assessments and assist with the identification of, and response to suicide risk. It requires nurses to work in a compassionate person-centred way with the individual to identify their own risk factors, triggers, needs and strengths, imparting hope and encouraging them to seek and accept support.

The Shared Learning in Clinical Practice Philosophy

Shared Learning in Clinical Practice (SLICP) is a policy relevant and service delivery focussed collaboration to promote best practice in mental health and suicide prevention. The strategic purpose of the initiative is to demonstrate through research and practical example, how much consumers, carers, clinicians, policy makers and academic faculty can achieve working together. Deep discussion, deep connectivity and diffusion of the insights are central to its philosophy. With a nursing focus and multidisciplinary in composition, the aim of each publication, podcast, film, social media communication and symposium is to capture and spread new ideas and know-how in mental health practice and challenge traditional ways of thinking. Shared Learning in Clinical Practice updates are regularly posted on Twitter at @MResearchUniSA.

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