

The "Alternatives to Suicide" Approach to Crisis:

Imagination, Common Sense, and
Reducing Harm



Wildflower Alliance

Home of the “Western Mass
Recovery Learning Community”

The Wildflower Alliance supports healing and empowerment for our broader communities and people who have been impacted by psychiatric diagnosis, trauma, extreme states, homelessness, problems with substances and other life-interrupting challenges. We do this through:

- Peer-to-peer support & genuine human relationships
- Alternative Healing Practices
- Learning Opportunities
- Advocacy

Essential to our work is recognizing and undoing systemic injustices such as racism, sexism, ableism, transphobia, classism, and psychiatric oppression.

Common Sense Tells Us...

A CRISIS

is not

a CRIME



Harm Reduction in Substance Use

- People use drugs for a reason (not because of moral weakness)
- Criminalization is not effective
- Force and Coercion are not effective
- There are ways to make drug use safer.

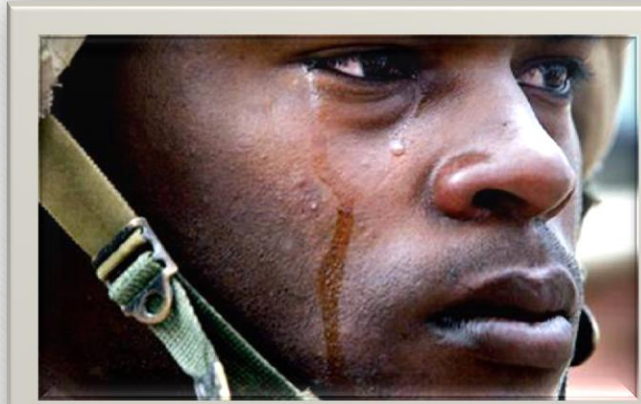


People Consider Suicide for a Reason... (often the same ones implicated in drug use)



- One in 15 have considered suicide over student loans (Washington Post)
- Higher minimum wage and Earned Income Tax Credits significantly reduce suicides (Washington Post)
- As Wealth Distribution Inequality grows in industrialized nations rates of suicide proportionately increase. (BMJ)
- Homelessness is associated with a 10x increase in risk of suicide. (NHCHC)
- States with the highest rates of poverty also have the highest rates of suicide (CDC)

T R A U M A



An ACE score of 4 makes someone 1,200% more likely to have a suicide attempt.... An ACE score of 6+ increases the likelihood by 5,000% (ACEs Too High)

Veterans are 42% more likely to have a suicide attempt than civilians (VA)

Rape victims are four times more likely to contemplate suicide than the general population (RAINN)

Being bullied, engaging in bullying behavior AND witnessing bullying is associated with long-term increased risk of suicidal actions (CDC)

* Rates of suicide among **Native Americans** in the US are double the national rate (CDC).

* **Gay teens** are 8.4 times more likely to attempt suicide than straight teens (PFLAG)

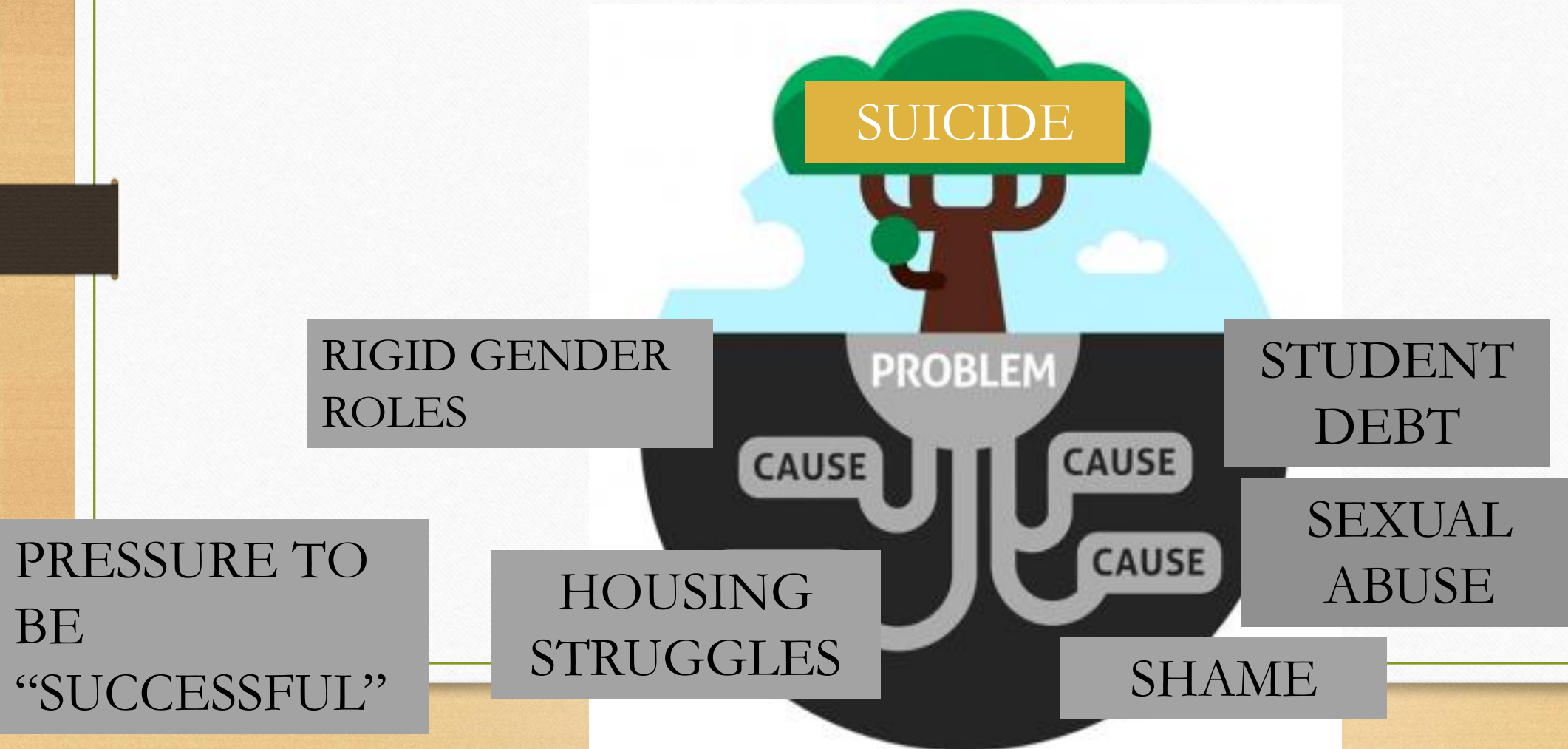
* 40% of **transgender folks** report at least one suicide attempt (Trevor Project)

* **Black children** ages 5 to 12 have a suicide rate of 2 x white children (Washington Post)

* Suicide risk for children diagnosed with autism is as much as 10 x the general population (ScienceDaily)



Unlike most existing suicide prevention models, the “Alternatives to Suicide” approach understands that Suicide is an attempt at a “Solution” versus the “Problem” itself... and emphasizes dialogue to uncover deeper causal roots.



There are not currently assessment protocols available with significant predictive value.



Joseph Franklin, a psychologist working and teaching at Harvard University was quoted as follows:

“Our analyses showed that science could only predict future suicidal thoughts and behaviors about as well as random guessing. In other words, a suicide expert who conducted an in-depth assessment of risk factors would predict a patient's future suicidal thoughts and behaviors with the same degree of accuracy as someone with no knowledge of the patient who predicted based on a coin flip...This was extremely humbling — after decades of research, science had produced no meaningful advances in suicide prediction.” (American Psychological Association, 2016)

Paradigm Shift!

Instead of focusing on the
unpredictable “**IF**”

We get farther with the
Why?

Instead of...

-
- *Do you have a plan?*
 - *Do you have means to carry it out?*
 - *Are they lethal means?*

Try...

-
- Do you want to talk about what's making life hard right now?
 - Did something painful happen recently?
 - Are you wanting to escape something in this world?
 - Is there something you need to make life more livable?

Excerpts from “Alternatives to Suicide” **Macro-Level** Assessment Tool...

- 2. Our community is one where affordable housing is accessible.
- 5. Our community actively addresses bullying in schools and online.
- 9. Our community has enacted mandatory waiting periods for purchasing fire arms.
- 10. Our community supports those who are in high-pressure jobs such as doctors, nurses, veterinarians, military.
- 11. Our community has a livable minimum wage.

(For each NO answer flip page for resource guide)

Criminalization Does Not Work

- And neither does utilizing criminalizing language...

commit verb

to do something wrong or illegal

to **commit** a crime/an offence

Suicide is not a Crime

- Mandated Reporter laws do not mention suicide. These laws pertain to the abuse and neglect of children.
- Duty to Protect statutes are rooted in the Tarasoff ruling and the obligation to protect a third party from harm.

Confronting “Legal” Fears with Case Law & Common Sense

“Mental health professionals are more worried about liability than they need to be, and they bring some of these problems on themselves by claiming an expertise in suicide prevention and treatment that the field just does not have.”



“Case law reviews indicate the odds of non-prescribing outpatient clinician being held liable for client suicide are the same as being struck by lightning”

-Susan Stefan, lawyer and author of *Rational Suicide, Irrational Laws: Examining Current Approaches to Suicide in Policy and Law* (278)

Instead of...

- *That's a liability.*
- *I could lose my license.*

Try...

- “Making organizational changes in this area could really improve connections and lives. Can we look deeper at what the fear of litigious suicide loss survivors is rooted in and obstacles it might create?”
- “Licenses are removed in state hearings where there is proof of gross negligence and abuse of power. Is that what is occurring here?”

Force & Coercion Are Not Effective

- Involuntary drug treatment was found to **increase** risk of fatal overdoses (*Massachusetts Department of Public Health*) and non-fatal overdoses (*Society for the Study of Addiction*).
- Acute psychiatric hospitalization is shown to **increase** risk of suicide. “The immediate post-discharge period is a time of marked risk, but rates of suicide remain high for many years after discharge”

Meta-analysis of over a 100 studies by the Journal of American Medicine

Coercion Increases Risk

*A June 2019 Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior called “**Perceived Coercion** During Admission Into Psychiatric Hospitalization Risk of Suicide Attempts After Discharge” explored this and concluded:*

“Patients’ perception of the context in which they were hospitalized is associated with a small but significant increase in their likelihood of post-discharge suicide attempts.”

Instead of...

- *If you are feeling this way I need to call crisis.*
- *It sounds like you are unsafe and need to go to the hospital.*
- *Sounds like you are really overwhelmed. I am going to take over now.*

Try...

- Is there anyone we could reach out to together that would feel supportive?
- What do you need to get through this?
- I am feeling overwhelmed by a desire to fix this. How can I best be supportive for you right now?

There are ways to make drug use safer.

- Needle Exchange
- Free Testing
- Education and Support
- AND, MOST EFFECTIVE, OVERDOSE PREVENTION SITES THAT ENSURE PEOPLE DO NOT USE ALONE.

Alternatives to Suicide Groups

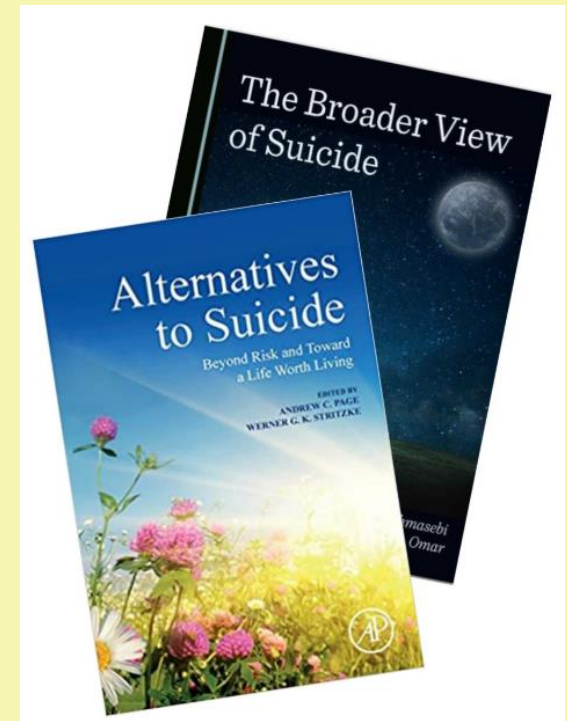
- Groups meet for 90 minutes in non-clinical settings
- Both facilitators openly identify with navigating suicidal thoughts or experiences
- First started meeting in 2008 and are funded by Tapestry Health (DPH) a program based in harm reduction
- Weekly groups meet throughout New England, as well as Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Canada and both coasts of Australia



The Alternatives to Suicide approach

Current Research Outcomes:

- Alternatives to Suicide appeared to lead to a positive change in participants' relationship to their suicidal thoughts, including a heightened ability to notice and sit with those feelings rather than be overtaken by them. (*Curtin University School of Occupational Therapy, Social Work & Speech Pathology, Radford, Wishart, Martin, 2019*).
- According to 90% of respondents, the most important factor of Alternatives to Suicide groups is the ability to talk about anything without fear of negative consequences like forced hospitalization. (*Wildflower Alliance, 2018*).



“Alternatives to Suicide” Approach

An Alternative to:

- Risk Assessment
- Focusing on Liability over Healing
- Diagnostics/Individual Pathology Framework
- Force / Coercion

Focuses on:

- Validation
- Curiosity
- Vulnerability
- Community

Silence and Shame

- Are consistently shown to be the factors implicated in studies as to why certain trauma survivors struggle more or for longer than others.
- Our approaches to suicide hold the key to addressing these factors... or to replicating them...

Common Sense means holding Pharmaceutical Companies Accountable

“The crisis in mental health should be managed not as a crisis of individual conditions, but as a crisis of social obstacles which hinders individual rights. Mental health policies should address the ‘power imbalance’ rather than ‘chemical imbalance’.”

- United Nations Report (June, 2017)



Instead of...

- *Did you take your meds today?*
- *It sounds like you are in a manic state right now.*
- *You have to remember that you are just like a diabetic.*
- *I am bipolar, too, so you should do what I did.*

Try...

- What are you feeling right now?
- It makes sense that you are feeling angry, sad, isolated.
- Are there times when this feels less heavy?
- I am here. I am listening. We can just sit in silence and cry if you need to.

Moving Forward from Trauma



Often most effective within the context of healing relationships

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What If....

#ZeroSuicide

Meant:

- #Zero Homelessness
- #Zero Bullying
- #Zero Institutional Trauma
- #Zero Shame



The Only Way to Get it Together... is Together.

- Study after study indicates that by a huge margin **the primary factor** in resilience is a sense of social connection.

(American Psychological Association)

- Recent research indicates that loneliness and social isolation are as deadly as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. (And more deadly than lack of exercise or “obesity”.)

(Center for Disease Control)

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