

Survivors tell of coping with the aftermath of suicide

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The last words Karin Verryt saw from her late partner appeared on a note.
Photo / George Novak

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New numbers revealed last week show suicide is at the highest level in New Zealand since records began 12 years ago. In the year to June 30, 685 people died by suicide - 17 more than in the previous year and just under twice the road toll.

The suicide rate stands at 13.93 per 100,000 people, compared to 13.67 in 2017/18, a 1.9 per cent increase.

Since 2007, 6889 New Zealanders have taken their own lives - 381 of those deaths happened in the Bay of Plenty.

New Zealand has one of the worst youth suicide rates in the OECD, and for males under 25, we have the highest rate. Māori are disproportionately represented. Suicide is the leading cause of death for people under age 25.

Each lost life inflicts collateral damage on loved ones - grieving partners, family members and friends who struggle to understand why someone would take their own life and how they could have prevented it.

Dawn Picken shares stories from locals affected by suicide and people trying to help them.

Advisory: This article discusses suicide and may be upsetting to some people.

"My whole future was gone" - Karin's Story

Karin Verryt says the last words she saw from her late partner appeared on a note saying, "I love you, Karin. I'm sorry."

Zita Taylor went for a drive to get chocolate, says Verryt, and never returned. She was 40 years old.

"She didn't have a history of depression. We were together 10 years. I realise now she must've been struggling with mental health, but she wasn't typical of what they describe of someone who's depressed."

Verryt says Taylor wasn't crying; she went to work and did other normal activities. There was no threatening or gifting of possessions. Men account for 75 per cent of suicides in New Zealand - another risk factor Zita lacked.

However, Verryt says Zita had a "devastating" childhood marked by trauma and never got counselling. Then she lost her job, but not before Verryt says Zita befriended a colleague who'd experienced similar childhood traumas and attempted suicide.

"If I'd known better and had more knowledge, I would've looked at getting her therapy and I didn't."

In fact, Verryt says she booked a psychotherapist Zita never got to see.

"She had it [suicide] organised, and if that's what they decide to do, I don't think anything can change it. They're disconnected from you. They assure you they're fine."

Verryt learned only after her partner's death that she had attempted suicide twice before, in her 20s.

Zita died September 13, 2004, in Auckland. Verryt moved to Waihi Beach three years ago and lives each day with the memory of someone she planned her future around.

"You have to reinvent your life. I'm still single 15 years later. I do get a bit pissed off and angry sometimes, but I get over it."

Counselling has helped. So has reading, journaling, art and creating a local support group for people affected by loved ones' suicides. Verryt started Soul Group late last year following the suicide of TVNZ broadcast Greg Boyed and another prominent community figure.

"This is Zita's legacy. I wouldn't have gotten here otherwise. There has to be something that comes from it. It's good for my healing as well, to know I have an impact on how people can work through their grief and provide a safe place for people to share."

Grief after a loved one has killed themselves is complicated, says Verryt. When someone dies from an accident or disease, she says there's something to blame.

"Unfortunately with suicide, you internalise it. You blame yourself because of what you did or didn't do, knew or didn't know. There are other complications of abandonment, lost confidence, self-esteem."

Verryt believes stigma surrounding suicide still exists, evidenced by questions she's received about manner of death and her late partner's state of mind.

"People think it must've been something you did. I've had people ask, 'Did you guys have an argument?'"

Verryt says she was lucky she grew up in a loving family. But the experience of losing a partner has made her an advocate for mental health support for those less fortunate. She also encourages more open discussions.

"Let's talk about things we have held in the taboo area forever. Anyone who's had childhood trauma needs to have very extensive counselling or psychotherapy."

Sarah Spicer - singing and caring cuts

Singer-songwriter and barbershop owner Sarah Spicer lost her brother, Matthew, to suicide in 1998.

She says the pair were close, having toured the US together as teenaged musicians. But Spicer says her brother suffered depression and lack of self-confidence after losing an eye to a hockey stick at age 12. She says he had schizophrenia, may have taken substances affecting his chemical brain balance and had recurring nightmares.



Singer-songwriter and barbershop owner Sarah Spicer lost her brother, Matthew, to suicide in 1998. Photo / Supplied

Back then, she says her family didn't know how to help Matthew. He was 27 when he died. She was 24.

"I absolutely thought he needed help."

Spicer says the impact of her brother's death was massive.

"Musically, he was basically my best friend. We were young and in the States all that time. We had written and performed all sorts of music. He was my guitar player and I was the singer."

She appeared on X Factor New Zealand in 2015, determined to continue her brother's legacy.

"To keep him alive and his memory, I started playing guitar and performing songs and trying to finish unfinished songs."

She's a solo mum to two boys, aged 15 and 17. The trio opened a barbershop in Waihi in June called Mad Cuts focused on friendly, compassionate service.

"It's a place for men to come and chill out. You can see that start to happen naturally on its own, anyways. It's just a place for people to talk. Talking is so important."

Spicer says the barbershop, with games like ping pong, Fortnite and poker, is her way of simultaneously giving back and surviving.

"I try to enjoy people as much as I can while they're here. I love it. It's very social."

She says she completed a youth counselling course and encounters many young people who think they're alone and unloved.

"For them to get to that point there's no way out, a total lack of love for life, it's just really sad and it is avoidable."

Spicer's next chapter will come in the form a CD with 30-year-old recordings of her brother, and a track with her nephew.

"Matthew had a son in the States. They met once when he was a baby and he'll be playing with his dad on the new album."

Megan's story - speaking up for childhood survivors

Megan Gamble lost her husband, Shawn Holland, to suicide in 2006. She moved to Ngongotahā, just outside Rotorua, from Tauranga about five months ago, seeking a simpler life.

"I've been able to purchase my own caravan and a cabin to do up."



Megan Gamble lost her husband to suicide in 2006. She is pictured with daughter Jaidana. Photo / Stephen Parker

Gamble says she has prioritised caring for her 23-year-old daughter, Jaidana, who has an intellectual disability and seizure disorder, and being a shoulder for Dylan, nearly 20, who lives with a friend. Her children were 9 and 6 when they lost their father.

"What's happened in the last couple weeks is my own son ... he's never wanted to have any sort of counselling or grief support, said 'I'll talk to you'. It's been nearly 13 years that Shawn suicided, and only now is his own son voicing how he feels ... everyone in their own time."

Gamble continues working to heal her own wounds through research, education and completing a social work qualification. Her main job, though, is keeping Jaidana happy and safe - she says her daughter's seizures have become more frequent each year following Shawn's death, and she has her own way of processing grief.

"She used to talk to Shawn in the garden, saying, 'Oh Daddy, don't be silly'. There'd be no one there."

Growing up, Gamble says her son never confided to friends how his dad died. He rebelled, quit school at 15 and has just recently found a girlfriend. Finally, Gamble says her son has told her he's ready to see a therapist.

"I've been waiting for this for so many years. I knew this day would happen and I feel very privileged because I don't want my son to go the way his dad did. I would rather he say his dad was selfish and I'm angry than say nothing at all."

Central government dollars and local DHB help

Numbers from the Bay of Plenty District Health Board show it accepted 7770 mental health and addiction services referrals in 2019, a 36 per cent increase from 5707 such referrals in 2014.

Central government in May announced it would boost mental health and addiction services by \$1.9 billion nationwide over five years.

BOPDHB clinical director mental health and addictions service (MHAS) Dr Fiona Miller says it's not yet clear when the money will make it into the local DHB budget, and how much it'll be.

"We understand the Ministry of Health is working through the necessary processes for allocating the funds from the wellbeing budget. Meanwhile here in the Bay of Plenty we are looking at a transformation process regarding our mental health and addiction services."



Dr Fiona Miller. Photo / Supplied

While numbers of mental health and addiction referrals have grown, Miller says inpatient capacity to treat people at risk of suicide remains the same.

"In terms of numbers of funded inpatient beds, there has been a youth respite service contracted from 2017. This is not for those at high risk of suicide. It allows a stepped-up approach for those who may be struggling with suicidal thoughts and/or other mental health/addiction issues, but where a hospital admission is not warranted or in their best interests."

Miller did not specify timeframes for access to treatment for those at risk of suicide. The district health board's Suicide Prevention/Postvention Plan 2018-2021 outlines one of the aims of the programme: reducing self-harm hospitalisations and reducing numbers of suspected suicides while under the care of DHB MHAS or discharged within six months.

She says the service aims to see every patient who has suicidal thoughts (ideation) referred to the mental health and addiction service in a timely manner according to their triage scale.

"At times of extreme pressure, when we are unable to assess someone in the timeframe suggested, then we ensure they are in a safe environment until we are able to see them. We are unable to provide average wait times specifically for those who are suicidal due to the way our data is collected."

Counselling available, but more funding needed

Grief Support Services (GSS) is a local non-profit organisation offering free counselling for children and adults. It runs an after-suicide support group called Waves and is co-ordinating a September 8 memorial service in Tauranga for those affected by suicide (see sidebar).

Its senior counsellor and team leader, Janet Baird, believes more people in the community are recognising the value of talk therapy after a loss. She says in July, half the service's referrals were from loss to suicide.

"It's not always current losses. Some of those people can be quite historic and something might have happened that's connected right back to that."



Grief Support Services senior counsellor and team leader Janet Baird.
Photo / Supplied

Baird affirms Verryt's view post-suicide grief can be complicated.

"Some people, it might be that their person was unwell or had drug and alcohol problems over the years. Sometimes people can follow that track

and make sense of it. Others cannot make any sense at all and it can be hard for people to get their head around why."

In addition, Baird says bereaved people are grappling with losing a loved one and the cruelty of hindsight and blame.

"They blame someone else or blame themselves. Not all the time, but it can be a factor that can be very hard for people."

In her experience, Baird says stigma surrounding suicide is diminishing.

"When we first started running the [Waves] group 10 or 11 years ago, there's a poem called Elephant in the Room about suicide and people not talking. For years, that poem was so relevant. We probably haven't had that poem read throughout the last four years."

Baird believes people are being more kind to those affected by suicide.

Baird says media attention driven by well-known figures such as Mike King and John Kirwan seems to have successfully pushed the message, 'speak up, seek help'.

"But the services aren't being resourced to keep up and that's what we're seeing. The demand has just grown so much."

She says referrals and client inquiries have soared the past year, but the number of clients the service can see remains static due to lack of funds to hire more counsellors.

Baird says wait list times for free grief counselling through the service have nearly trebled compared with 2018.

With all the talk about suicide prevention, why are numbers still rising?
Baird says we need a holistic approach to wellbeing.

"We've got to address housing, just the whole drug and alcohol problem, mental health services ... preventative care will make a whole lot of difference. At the moment, it's too hard to get.

"It's never too late to have a conversation about what you've suffered and what you've been through and what the effects of loss to suicide have been."

Disclaimer: Dawn Picken is a board member of Grief Support Services, a local non-profit providing counselling and information for everyone experiencing grief and loss. Counselling and information for everyone experiencing grief and loss.

Bay of Plenty District Health Board Suicide Report

According to the BOPDHB's Suicide Prevention Postvention Action Plan 2018-2021, men account for 75 per cent of all suicides annually with those of working age (20-65 years) accounting for more than half and those aged 20-39 years for at least 25 per cent. Māori are also highly over-represented in annual suspected suicide statistics, with rates well above the national average and that of other ethnicities in every year since coronial data was reported.

The BOPDHB report says substantive variation in annual suicide rates for youth were observed the past 10 years, with rates ranging from 7.51/100,000 population in 2007/08 to 37.28/100,000 population in 2008/09. It says because relatively small numbers of youth suicides happen in the Bay of Plenty each year (generally less than 10), variations in suicide rates are not unexpected.

"Suicide rates can be influenced heavily by events such as suicide clusters; one such event occurred during 2008/09, which, in part, explains the high youth suicide rate in that year."

Tauranga memorial service to remember people lost to suicide

Grief Support Services is co-ordinating a service tomorrow to honour loved ones lost to suicide. The event is held to coincide with World Suicide Prevention Day, which falls on September 10.

Everyone is welcome to attend and take part in creating art or a story, or simply coming to listen to music from Sarah Spicer and speakers who'll share their experiences. The service starts at 10.30am at Daniel's in the Park, 53 11th Ave. Morning tea will be provided afterwards.

Post-Suicide Support Groups:

Tauranga: Waves After Suicide Programme

Call Denise, 578 4480 or support@griefsupport.org.nz.

Waihi support group: 1st Saturday of each month. Text or phone Karin 021 1037404. Email: riverlight62@gmail.com

WHERE TO GET HELP:

If you are worried about your or someone else's mental health, the best place to get help is your GP or local mental health provider. However, if you or someone else is in danger or endangering others, call police immediately on 111.

OR IF YOU NEED TO TALK TO SOMEONE ELSE:

- 0800 543 354 (0800 LIFELINE) or free text 4357 (HELP) (available 24/7)
- <https://www.lifeline.org.nz/services/suicide-crisis-helpline>
- YOUTHLINE: 0800 376 633
- NEED TO TALK? Free call or text 1737 (available 24/7)
- KIDSLINE: 0800 543 754 (available 24/7)
- WHATSUP: 0800 942 8787 (1pm to 11pm)
- DEPRESSION HELPLINE: 0800 111 757 or TEXT 4202