THE CATALYST

You are not alone – let's talk about suicidal ideation

Reducing stigma lets us speak, assess risk, and seek support.

By: Jessica Ward-King | Posted: September 14, 2023

I'm going to go to a bit of a dark place, and I would invite you to follow me there because it is important. I have had (and the way bipolar disorder goes so cyclically, likely will have again) suicidal ideation, and I would like to tell you what it is like. I've never told anyone this before, but I would like to tell you this now because of suicide awareness day, which is commemorated each September 10 in honour of all those who have died by suicide and those living with suicide attempts or suicidal ideation and their loved ones.

Suicidal ideation, or thoughts of suicide, are undoubtedly different for everyone, so I can only tell you about my experience. If my experience can make even one person feel seen or understood, it will be worth it.

Most often, my thoughts of suicide are passive, as in "I would be better off dead" or "It would be better if I didn't wake up." These are the thoughts I will be describing in this blog post. Certainly, when I am in more distress, these thoughts can become more active, culminating, for me, in plans to die by suicide, but these are more rare (and these, particularly when accompanied by plans, are where interventions need to be made by loved ones and mental health professionals).

For me, my thoughts of suicide are a study in opposites. They are equal parts horrifying, foreign thoughts, and soothing, familiar thoughts. Let me explain what I mean. Thoughts that I would be better off dead come unbidden into my mind and are not welcome there. I am deeply ashamed of them. I know they are "deviant" (at least, I choose to label them as such), and they seem to come at me from some outside force, and I don't want them to. But at the same time, they are soothing and familiar – they offer a way out of a situation that I have thought through and thought through and for the life of me cannot find a way out of (my depression). They offer a seductively *easy* way out of my situation at that, almost like a mother soothing me with a "there, there" and a pat on the back, promising me that it will all be alright – there is a solution (and it is easy).

Suicidal ideation changes volume, too. Sometimes, it is a whisper in the back of my mind, barely there but just audible. Sometimes, it is insistent, like a child asking for screen time tugging at my sleeve. Sometimes, it feels like it is literally screaming to be heard, and nothing else can drown it out and I am just left to listen to it suggest, cajole, demand, insist and request that its ideas be heeded.

Does having these thoughts mean that I am planning to die by suicide? No. As dark and insistent as they are, these thoughts are just thoughts. Just like the thoughts in traffic that you would like to ram that car in front of you or any of the other fantasies that pass through your mind throughout your day, suicidal ideations are just that – fantasies. Fantasies that make life more

livable. It is because they are so stigmatized that they are so frightening and so difficult to talk about. Now, we have to be careful to walk the line between reducing the stigma around suicide and making it a genuine option, but I believe that that line is thick enough that there is room to reduce the stigma and give relief to people like me, who struggle with guilt and shame over their suicidal thoughts to the point that they won't seek help.

So, with that, what makes up the resistance, you might ask? What's the good news story here? I am lucky. I have a partner I can talk to about these scary thoughts. She doesn't buckle and collapse. She listens calmly, stroking my hand all the while. Then she asks if I have any plans. She asks what we should do – should we call my psychiatrist (whom I am also fortunate to be able to disclose suicidal ideation to without being summarily put in the hospital) or take me to the hospital, or are we safe just to wait and see, and then she lays with me while I cry. I am lucky. Not everyone has a partner or loved one like this because not everyone understands that just having these thoughts does not mean that I am imminently in danger or, worse, "crazy." Most people, when they hear of suicidal thoughts, get quite scared themselves, and they lose themselves in that fear. Please, don't. I assure you, your loved one who is telling you this is more afraid than you are. Keep your cool. Better yet, before you are ever in this situation, get some basic training that will help you cope, like Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) or even more specialized suicide assistance training. Courses like this will help you to be able to assess risk and figure out what to do next, whether that is simply being with your loved one or whether that is making a safety plan and getting help.

Suicide is not something that affects other people. In this country, 12 people die by suicide every day – and that is just the deaths that are verified as suicide. Due to stigma, many deaths are attributed to other causes rather than bringing shame to a family or community. It is the second leading cause of death among youth and young adults (15-34 years), and 12% of Canadians admit to having had thoughts of suicide in their lifetimes. We all love someone who is thinking about or will think about dying by suicide. I hope this little piece of vulnerability will help at least one of them.

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BSc, PhD, *aka the StigmaCrusher*, is a mental health advocate and keynote speaker with a rare blend of academic expertise and lived experience. Equipped with a doctorate in experimental psychology and firsthand knowledge of bipolar disorder, she's both heavily educated and, as she likes to say, heavily medicated. Crazy smart, she's been crushing mental health stigma since 2010.

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