

# **Changing the Narrative on Suicide #StartTheConversation**

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## **Introduction**

Suicide is a global issue, that affects many individuals and communities. The theme for World Suicide Prevention Day (WSPD) 2024-2026, 'Changing the Narrative on Suicide' aims to address the issue by changing perceptions and discussions about the issue, by encouraging individuals to be open, supportive, and understanding to affected individuals, instead of remaining silent and promoting stigma (IASP, 2023; Betts, 2024). This will create a supportive and compassionate environment where individuals can ask for help freely. The initiative #StartTheConversation encourages dialogue to prevent suicide. Conversations about mental health can make individuals feel less isolated, and foster a sense of community as struggling individuals will get required support (Hassan et al., 2020). Furthermore, starting conversations will educate the public and address myths and misinformation that contribute to stigma.

## **The current narrative on suicide**

The current state of suicide is majorly based on stigma and silence. Societal taboos and misconceptions about mental health issues create an environment where people avoid discussing suicide due to lack of understanding or fear, which makes many to view suicide and mental health struggles as a sign of weakness (Al-Harabi et al., 2021). As a result, individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts tend to feel ashamed and isolated which prevents them from the help they need. Many people are uncomfortable discussing suicide which results in silence and limits awareness and education about potential signs or where to get support (Blanchard & Farber, 2020). Lack of awareness can make myths and misconceptions to prevail, and result in stigma. Stigma and silence can prevent individuals from reaching out for help as they fear to be judged or misunderstood, hence fail to discuss their struggles with friends, family, or mental health professionals, and also limit adequate support systems to address the needs.

## **Changing the narrative**

Changing the narrative about suicide means transforming how we talk about, understand, and address the issue. It involves moving away from remaining silent or causing stigma around the issue, and creating a culture of openness, empathy, and support. This transformation requires society to recognize that suicide is a complex public health issue that is not caused by personal failure or weakness. It means promoting a narrative where individuals who seek help are viewed as strong, people prioritize mental health, and everyone feels empowered to discuss their struggles without fear that they will be judged (Miller et al., 2024). The aim of the new theme for WSPD 2024-2026, 'Changing Narrative on Suicide' is to achieve various goals.

- ❖ To raise awareness about suicide showing that it can be prevented through effective support systems hence reduce stigma
- ❖ To encourage open and honest conversations about mental health where everyone encourages this discussion and views it as normal, hence creating support and ensuring that those who need help are not alone
- ❖ To advocate for changes such as policies and legislation that improve access to mental health care and support

## **#Start the Conversation**

Starting conversations about suicide and mental health will largely reduce stigma and address barriers. Open discussions about these topics will normalize the conversation, make it easier for others to share their experiences and seek help, making them feel understood and not judged. Hassan et al (2020) argue that discussions can spread accurate information about mental health and suicide, and counter misconceptions and ignorance. Besides, sharing personal stories and experiences can make the issue more human, foster empathy, and reduce fear associated with discussing mental health. Furthermore, individuals will most likely feel comfortable seeking help when they see others discussing their issues more openly. Individuals can foster engagement through various ways including;

- Personal outreach by checking in with friends, family, or colleagues by asking how they are feeling, to open doors for conversations
- Organizing or participating in community events focused on mental health awareness to create safe spaces for discussion (Blanchard & Farber, 2020)

- Using platforms like Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook to share stories, supportive messages or mental health resources using hashtags like #StartTheConversation
- Education initiatives in schools, workplaces or community can incorporate mental health education in their programs or use speakers
- Support groups where individuals can share their experiences and receive peer support

### **Actionable steps**

Starting the conversations about mental health can feel challenging. However, various practical steps can make it easier and more effective. Some of the strategies that can help individuals and communities engage in these discussions include

- Being genuine and open by approaching conversations with sincerity and openness and expressing willingness to listen without judging
- Choosing the right time and place such as a quiet private place where one can feel safe and comfortable, and avoiding rushing the conversation to give enough time for attentive listening
- Using open-ended questions
- Listening actively with no interruptions and showing empathy and understanding while acknowledging feelings
- Sharing information about mental health resources such as counseling services, crisis support, and online support groups (Miller et al., 2024).

### **Impact of changed narrative**

Changing how we talk about suicide can have many positive outcomes. First, individuals will reach out for support as they will not fear to be judged, which will lead to earlier intervention. Besides, it will reduce stigma that prevents individuals from seeking help. It will also make communities to be equipped to support individuals struggling with mental health. Furthermore, increased public awareness and advocacy can initiate changes in policies that can improve access to mental health services, funds for the programs, and preventative measures (Alegria et al., 2021). Finally, the access to support and reduced stigma will lead to improved mental health outcomes such as lower suicide rates, reduced mental health crises and better quality of life.

Such open conversations have yielded positive results in various parts. For example, 'It's OK to Talk' campaign in India created safe spaces for young people to discuss mental health, reduced stigma and encouraged them to seek help (MHIN, n.d). In addition, Mindframe Initiative focuses on how media reports on suicide and mental health issues which promotes responsible and accurate reporting, which has helped change public perceptions and reduce stigma (Mindframe, n.d). 'Time to Change' Campaign in UK aimed to reduce stigma and discrimination related to mental health (Mind, n.d).

In conclusion, changing the narrative on suicide can address the global health issue as it will encourage openness and support and shift from silence and stigma, creating an environment where people seek and discuss their struggles easily. These conversations will enhance awareness, facilitate better mental health support, and hence reduce suicide rates.

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