

Finding alternatives to suicide

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On being faced with dealing with the aftermath of the suicide of a loved one, family and friends often say, "if only he or she had called me" If only he'd asked for help..." and so forth. But from the perspective of the people who commit suicide, at that moment it seems to them that there is no other way forward -- no other possibilities present themselves.

A new approach that integrates ancient meditation practices and modern therapy aims to prevent the recurrence of suicidal depression. The intention of the new approach is to enable participants to be able to see the range of options which may be there in these difficult moments.

The new approach, to be trialled in North Wales and Oxford, would provide the health service with a new therapy to offer people with recurrent depression who are also at greater risk of suicidal thoughts. The approach moves away from simply treating people's problems to helping people find a life that is worth living.

The Centre for Mindfulness at Bangor University's School of Psychology will receive £1.1 million from the Wellcome Trust to roll-out the trial, following positive pilots by Professor Mark Williams at Oxford University (formerly of Bangor University). He has spent five years developing effective ways of assisting people with recurrent depression and suicidality.

Over 300 people will take part in the trial, with half the number to be recruited in North Wales. Some will take part in the new programme, while others will receive alternative group therapies to enable the

researchers to see what elements of the approach are most helpful.

The new 'therapy' is based on mindfulness - a way of approaching internal and external experience with a sense of openness, acceptance and non-judgement. Practicing mindfulness helps people to approach whatever they're coping with in a new way. Mindfulness helps the individual to become more accepting of their emotions- and in turn, this can reduce the stress caused by these emotions.

"The way in which we react to stressful or emotional situations we face can cause further stress. Mindfulness is effective in reducing this extra layer of difficulty and struggle. When practiced by people with chronic pain, for example, the acceptance of pain reduces the struggle we experience around the pain and so reduces stress. This can often have the effect of reducing the actual experience of the pain.' explains Rebecca Crane, Director of Training at the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice.

"We know that in people with depression, fear of the return of depression can create a way of reacting to feelings of sadness which feeds the downward spiral into depression. Mindfulness helps individuals to see clearly and accept the state of mind that they are in and to respond rather than react to it. In this way it can become possible to step out of the 'loops' we get caught up in.

"The aim in this research is to test the effectiveness of this new approach in helping people to approach what they're coping with in a new way," explains Rebecca Crane.

Source: Bangor University

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