

Breaking the silence of suicide

May 6 2013

Just over a month ago, a young high school student from Halifax committed suicide after photos of her being raped were posted on the Internet. Her story wasn't just about bullying. It was also about the complex feelings her friends and family faced with her decision to take her own life.

Such a reaction is common to cultures around the world. New research from Concordia University shows that, no matter where it occurs, a veil of shame and sense of taboo surround [suicide](#). These attitudes often force those affected to grieve alone and can produce feelings of [helplessness](#) and despair.

Yehudit Silverman, a professor in Concordia University's Department of Creative Arts Therapies, has focused much of her career on the issue of suicide. Having written and directed a film called *The Hidden Face of Suicide*, Silverman has now published new findings on the cross-cultural commonalities associated with suicide in the peer-reviewed journal, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*.

The article, co-authored by art therapist, Fiona Smith, and drama therapist, Mary Burns, describes how using the arts can help create dialogue between people from diverse cultural communities, all affected by suicide, so that they may begin to heal and hope. "When a subject is taboo, it is important to find ways other than words to express feelings," explains Silverman. "Using the arts can be a powerful means of sharing what feels inexpressible, and helping to break through the silence and [stigma](#) which still surrounds suicide"

The results of Silverman's findings are based on an innovative symposium, held in Montreal in June 2010, which brought together people from Inuit, Mohawk, Jewish, Christian, Baha'i, South-Asian Canadian, senior and LGBTQ communities. At the beginning of the symposium, members from each group performed a non-verbal presentation to show their community's perspective on suicide. These powerful presentations allowed participants to see the differences and similarities in how each culture views suicide.

Participants worked in cross-cultural groups, organized according to what themes and identities spoke most intensely to their own experience of suicide. They were then able to explore perspectives and feelings that brought them to the symposium. All work was done through creative artistic expressions of the group.

One group built a tepee with a white mask with tears drawn on at its base. A bowl of water was placed in front of the structure, circled by candles and cedar branches, with feathers placed in the circle to represent a victim of suicide. "We want to create a ritual and a safe space to respond to suicide awareness; a ceremony to create openness, sharing and a connection to the earth," explained one participant. Another project involved the creation of banners, combining text, colour, images and objects, to reflect themes and feelings emerging among participants.

Using such exercises over the course of the symposium, the researchers pinpointed cross-cultural themes about suicide that emerged from the discussion and creative expressions of the participants. These themes included suicide as taboo, hiding and isolation, multi-generational impact, witnessing others and being witnessed. As Silverman points out: "Participants realized for the first time that the taboo of suicide touches every culture, every community, every class and status."

The project was a success on two levels: using art to facilitate suicide awareness and finding themes that transcend cultural boundaries. Explains Silverman, "Our findings offer a new method of bringing out complex feelings associated with suicide. By showing that different communities and cultures are all connected around this issue, we can begin to help with healing – and with and breaking the silence."

Provided by Concordia University

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