Shame, anger and vulnerability behind men’s suicides

Six young men commit suicide in Norway every month. This number has remained steady for years. Researchers are tracking down the cause.

Norway is one of the first countries in the world to establish a national plan of action to reduce suicides. The scheme was launched in 1994.

“Nevertheless, suicide have rates remained fairly stable and young men in particular are the cause for concern,” says Researcher and Psychologist Mette Lyberg Rasmussen of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health.

Need to change focus

Rasmussen led a new study of ten suicides committed by men aged 30 and younger who had previously attempted suicide or had in been in contact with mental health services.

“Despite establishing schemes in the mental health system, including ones specifically aimed at preventing suicides, we’ve had very little success in lowering the suicide rates,” she says.

“This means we need to shift our focus from the often repeated risk research that has dominated the field, and attempt to understand why people take their own lives, independent of mental disorders,” says Rasmussen.

She considers it vital to find out why young men, who are ostensibly well-functioning, could decide out of the blue to end their lives.

Particularly vulnerable

It can be hard to guess that something is amiss. Neither close family members, friends nor former sweethearts understood beforehand that the men, who were very achievement-oriented, were in a serious crisis.

The results show that the close survivors had failed to detect signs of a serious psychological crisis. But the analysis shows the men were in their only way particularly vulnerable.

This vulnerability, as Rasmussen and colleagues point out, relate to the men’s inability to bear shortcomings, their failure to achieve goals or cope with rejection.

Ramussen explains in these situations, strong feelings of shame and hostility emerge. This is something that this group of young men cannot deal with or regulate:
“The crux of the matter is not the goals per se, but the feeling of failure as a person if they don’t achieve their life’s goals,” she says.

The problem can often be an inability to manage and rebound after a romantic break-up or a defeat at school or work.

**Reaching young men**

Suicide was seen by the men as a viable exit from a situation they experienced as unbearable mental pain, she and her colleagues say in their study.

Rasmussen thinks the findings challenge the established viewpoint of suicide as a symptom of an underlying psychological disorder ? a stance which saddles psychiatry with the tools and responsibility for prevention.

“We should start thinking more about prevention outside the realm of the mental health services and move our focus to discovering how we can get through to these young men. No one in our study had been in contact with the mental health services in the period prior to their suicides,” she points out.

The new findings are in step with recent studies showing that up to 40 percent of the people who commit suicide have not had any identifiable mental disorder beforehand.

**61 in-depth interviews, six suicide notes**

The analysis was based on 61 in–depth interviews with mothers, fathers, siblings, friends and former sweethearts of ten men who committed suicide. Six suicide notes were also included.

For each suicide, Rasmussen and colleagues carried out four to eight interviews with surviving friends, families and acquaintances about how they perceived the deceased prior to his death. In cases where a farewell letter was left, it was included.

Rasmussen says the findings show the young men had not expressed any direct plans to take their own lives.

“The surviving family and acquaintances do, however, mention some indirect indications prior to the suicide, relating to how they felt the young men expressed desperation. The men had also talked about how they should have handled things differently,” says Rasmussen.

She adds that family and close acquaintances can be essential in confronting and helping these men in their anger and desperation.

“It’s especially important to address communication that leaves you wondering, gut feelings that disturb you, and explore these directly with the person right there and then,” she said.

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