

# *Talking about the 'suicidal thoughts': Towards an alternative framework*

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This paper documents work with two women who have been subjected to suicidal thoughts. Part of this work is presented in the form of a collective narrative document. The final part of the paper presents an alternative framework for conversations about suicide, rather than standard checklists, as well the author's suggestions for questions workers can ask themselves when meeting with people experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Keywords: suicide, women, mental health, double-stories, definitional ceremony, living document, collective narrative document

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past several months, I have been engaging in an initiative with two women who have experienced significant and recurrent trauma in childhood and as adults. One of the troubling consequences of the mistreatment they have suffered has included being subjected to suicidal thoughts. In this paper, it is an honour for me to be able to provide a platform for these women's voices and to share reflections of how my understandings and practice has been affected in response to their expressions. In honouring these women's histories, their hopes of making a difference, and their special skills and knowledges, I feel a strong resonance with the words of Michael White:

*My meetings with people who consult me over a wide range of predicaments, concerns and problems have always been significant personal and life-shaping encounters. And more than this, the people who have consulted me over the years have not only opened their lives to me in ways that, in the course of their lives, they have not to others, but they have also significantly included me in their lives. This inclusion is such that these people populate many of the territories of my identity – I regard them to be fellow travellers, and they have made a significant contribution to the cast of the characters of my life. (White, 2002, p. 13)*

## JOINING LIVES THROUGH DOCUMENTATION

The initiative I will describe in this paper began when one of the women said to me: 'There should be an AA for people with suicidal thoughts'. I understood this as expressing how good it would be to be able to talk with others who have had to battle the suicidal thoughts about how they 'get through'. When I shared this hope or wish with another woman who was consulting me and who had similar experiences of being ambushed by suicidal thoughts, she talked with me in a way she had not before about her experiences and struggles with suicidal thoughts. With her permission, I then created a document using her words and phrases.

Creating therapeutic documents is something I do in my work as a way of 'rescuing the said from the saying of it' (after Geertz; see Newman, 2008).

This can include rescuing the expressions of difficulties faced and, as such, acknowledging hardship, as well as capturing the accounts of people's initiatives and the meanings they give to these.

I shared the second woman's document of her struggles with the first woman, and then documented her response, and we engaged in a process of sharing back-and-forth and adding to the emerging documents. David Newman (2008) refers to this practice of creating therapeutic documents that are added to by various clients over time as 'living documents'.

The decision to create a living document in relation to suicidal thoughts came from my wish to link these women around their similar experiences and concerns. Individual counselling work can be isolating if it supports a cultural discourse that mental health struggles are a private matter. In fact, conceptualising mental health struggles as a private matter can at times lead to a profound sense of isolation – an isolation that can powerfully contribute to the influence of shame in a person's life. During the process of gathering and sharing stories of living with suicidal thoughts, it quickly became apparent that the women's significant insider-knowledge could make a difference both for practitioners and for others facing similar difficulties.

Overtime, I created a collective document from the women's words and phrases, arranging these into themes that held significance for them. My intention was to capture knowledge-in-the-making, to document alternative knowledges which might challenge some taken-for-granted ideas about how to respond to people who are being ambushed by suicidal thoughts, and to initiate a collective response to what is often considered a private matter (see Pluznick and Kis-Sines, 2008).

Collective narrative documentation (Denborough, 2008) is one way of responding when we recognise that the hardships faced by an individual we are meeting with are shared in some way by a broader collective. The document I created with the women was a double-storied document, which aimed 'to collectively convey a range of hard-won skills and knowledges, in parallel with a rich acknowledgment of the circumstances in which these have been hard-won' (Denborough, 2008, p. 36).

Once the document was created, the women thought it would be good to come together for a formal re-telling (reading) of it, which we did in my office. In this paper, I will share words and knowledge of the women about:

1. The effects of suicidal thoughts and acknowledging the difficulties
2. How we get through hard times
3. How linking lives can make a difference
4. Some of the effects of professional responses to suicidal thoughts.

Finally, I will offer some reflections that have emerged from this process in relation to how we, as professionals, work with those affected by suicidal thoughts.

### **ACKNOWLEDGING THE DIFFICULTIES**

Many women who consult me have lived long hours with suicidal thoughts and at times have found it a real challenge to get through. This was true for the women who participated in this project and it was important to me to honour their experiences of pain, loss, and hardship. It was my intention to richly acknowledge the difficulties they had faced and to talk with them about these difficulties in ways that would be distancing of their identity from the problem. The narrative practice of externalising (White & Epston, 1990) assists people to separate from problems, as it reflects a commitment to see problems not as residing 'inside' people but instead as a product of history, culture, and discourse. We engaged in externalising conversations to 'research' together the effects of living with 'the suicidal thoughts' while minimising blame and shame.

A sample of the kinds of externalising questions that might be asked to explore the effects of 'the suicidal thoughts' include:

- Are the suicidal thoughts affecting how you think about yourself? What do you notice?
- Are they interfering with important relationships? How do they do this?
- Are they making it hard to imagine a life worth living?
- Are they having any effect on your hope about getting help?

Both women expressed what a different experience it was to be talking in these ways. As one woman said, 'Talking about the dark thoughts is not about dwelling in the darkness, but rather about giving them light'.

I will now share an extract from the women's collective document about the difficulties they have experienced as a result of 'the suicidal thoughts'. The themes they mentioned included 'disconnection and isolation', 'double the burden', 'experiences of shame and guilt', and 'experiences of not mattering'. Within the following extract you will notice the use of both individualistic and collective speech patterns. David Denborough (2008) discusses the implications of these different uses of language in his book on collective narrative practice. By interweaving individual and collective voice, I hoped this document would speak not only for the individuals whose stories are conveyed, but in some way also for all people who struggle with suicidal thoughts.

#### ***Disconnection and isolation***

*We talked about the intense sense of isolation we have experienced and our experiences of disconnection from others. The dark thoughts can get you feeling so disconnected. They can even convince you that it is better to be disconnected because then you don't have to pretend or imagine that others could understand.*

*We spoke about how well-intentioned comments from others in expressions such as 'Don't dwell on the negative thoughts when you are depressed', 'Don't feed the sadness', 'Don't talk about the suicidal thoughts', and 'Don't think about them', can send a message that you should not talk about the thoughts. Sometimes, you can even feel like others are afraid to hear them and then you can begin to think that you are tainting others with them.*

*The world says 'don't share', so you don't. This leaves you very isolated and alone with the dark thoughts, with their tactics and their surprise attacks. Then when you are*

*under attack, it is like you are on a battlefield and in the battle by yourself. You are on this battlefield alone; it is a battlefield with no retreat fortress, and no guards to hide behind. This is an incredible burden to carry alone.*

### **Double the burden**

*It can also be difficult when you feel on more solid ground and want to talk with someone, but when you try to talk about how hard these times are you get treated differently: people stop calling or act uneasy and now you have to be light (pretend) and then you have nowhere to go.*

*It's often felt as if the dark thoughts were harmful to others – this is a constant notion that I am vigilant about. Hiding them seems to protect others but this aloneness keeps you hidden and seems to affirm the idea that you are not good for others.*

*I am the one that is not well and I end up looking after the healthy one. This is double the burden.*

### **Experiences of shame and guilt**

*It is easy to end up feeling ashamed for 'having these thoughts', like we should be doing something better. It feels like you are the only one. The believing that you are the only one is such a huge shame ... that in itself makes you feel like you want to disappear. It is at that point that you can't even talk.*

*The shame and guilt can get very big when others suggest that we should think about our families, or about our jobs, or about our religious beliefs. I can't say what is happening to me because I think that others will say, 'How dare you? How dare you? It is such a beautiful day, you have a good job, you have beautiful children, and you are healthy'. All those things ... they are true, but instead of being helpful, it just adds to the guilt. How is it that I feel this way when there are people fighting for their*

*lives in many other situations and they don't give up? So how is it that I feel this way? What is wrong with me? It just makes it very evident that there is something wrong with me. You are constantly feeling that you are hurting everyone around you and that a conversation about the dark thoughts could have long-lasting damage.*

### **Experiences of not mattering**

*The dark thoughts are constantly reminding you of how little you matter. At these times, it's a hard place to say, 'This is what I'm feeling and it is real enough for someone to respond to' versus not being 'good enough' to express the struggles or to deserve a response ... When the 'not-good-enough' wins out, you end up hiding how awful you feel about yourself, as you don't want others to see. At these times it is hard to imagine the possibility of feeling differently, and you can feel less and less hopeful.*

As a worker, hearing about these hardships made me reflect on what it took for these women to ask for help. Knowing about these struggles makes it possible for me to see the act of asking for help as a significant act of resistance. This was made particularly vivid to me in the expression of one woman: '[Facing suicidal thoughts] ... is truly about managing to exist and the idea of sharing this moment with others is terrifying: what will they say and feel, and how will this change the way they see you and talk with you? What will happen, what will they do, and what if it doesn't help?'

Now, whenever I am meeting with someone facing suicidal thoughts, I ask myself the question: 'What has it taken for this person to ask for help with the difficulties they are facing?'

Creating opportunities for the women to richly describe the hardships associated with suicidal thoughts also provided opportunities to hear about the responses women were making in these situations. It was through richly acknowledging the hardships, that the significance of these responses became clearer.

## HOW WE GET THROUGH DARK TIMES

When I spoke with the women about writing this paper, they were very clear that in sharing stories of living with the suicidal thoughts, they were not only wanting to tell stories of the difficulties faced, but rather to include stories of everyday resistance, stories of special skills and abilities, and opportunities that they use to respond to these challenges. These are women who have tremendous skills in getting through tough times. They have survived trauma, loss, and injustice and have continued moving forward in their lives. And yet, many of their skills, as well as their purposes and commitments, beliefs and values, hopes and dreams, became invisible when they were seen in emergency rooms, admitted to inpatients units, or when viewed through standard assessment protocols. Creating the collective document has involved capturing and making visible stories of the women's lives, struggles, and special skills. These accounts of their lives are 'double-storied'.

## DOUBLE-STORIED ACCOUNTS

The commitment to elicit and document double-stories is based on Michael White's belief that no-one is a passive recipient of the difficulties they face in life, people always respond in the ways that are available to them, and these responses reflect particular skills and knowledges of life (White, 2005). Discovering and richly describing these skills and knowledges of life invites a sense of personal agency which White (2005) describes as:

'a sense of self that is associated with the perception that one is able to have some effect on the shape of one's own life; a sense that one is able to intervene in one's life as an agent of what one gives value to and an agent of one's own intentions, and the sense that the world is at least minimally responsive to the fact of one's existence'. (White, 2005, p. 14)

Asking the women in this project how they have been responding, about what they have been doing, thinking, or imagining to get through, led to conversations that were revealing of their agency. We talked about ways they were able to make it through the next hour, and ways in which they were able to create sense of safety, of comfort, of distraction, and of connection.

Some possible questions to elicit double-storied accounts include:

- How have you been getting through these painful/hard struggles?
- What has been helping you get through?
- Are there ways that you use to create safety or comfort even for a short time?
- Are there ways you are able to distract yourself from the thoughts?
- Do you have ways of finding support or finding connection with other people, with pets, or with particular objects that have significance for you?
- What do you do or think about that helps you hold onto possibilities for life?
- How did you decide that it would be important for you to come here today? Or talk with me about this today?

My interest in what the women were able to do and what they knew about getting through difficult times with suicidal thoughts created openings for the telling of many different stories. As one woman said, 'It [your interest] opens up the possibility that here is a person with a story. It is more important in this moment to hear the other story than at any other time, because the dark thoughts have been convincing you that you do not have a story worth living'.

Exploring women's skills and knowledges about getting through tough times, and eliciting stories about the histories of these skills, can serve as an antidote to the sense of shame, hopelessness, and futility that people who have been struggling with suicidal thoughts often describe. These skills and knowledges are also an entry point into alternative storylines of identity which can provide a foundation for taking new actions.

One woman, for instance, after speaking about her skills and knowledges in dealing with hardship was, for the first time, able to imagine talking with her family about a previous attempt she had made to take her life. She expressed her purposes and hopes in talking about this:

'My husband might have this story [of the suicide attempt] in his head ... but perhaps not the whole story or an accurate story. [By speaking about what happened] ... he could take in my story and

enrich his story. With the children ... if they do not know the whole story, they do not know me. I hate that their story may be based on a conversation we have not had. My hope is not to always have to imagine their story. The story is much clearer to me now. It is not about sharing what an awful person I am, but rather about how awful I sometimes feel'.

Making it possible for the women to tell double-storied accounts of their lives enabled a different sense of personal agency. The following extract from the collective document describes some of the special knowledge and skills that women had been using to get through. One of the key themes that the women described was the importance of being able to talk with others. This theme was named 'Looking to the outside world'.

### **Looking to the outside world**

*Saying it and being heard is a good thing. It can make all the difference. When you speak and there are ears that have heard, it allows you to think, 'All right then, this is okay, you can feel this. You don't have to feel guilty about having the suicidal thoughts or sharing them. When you can share the thoughts and feel heard, there is a relief. I don't have to pretend and then I don't have to be alone with them.*

*During times of struggle with the dark thoughts, it can make a difference if the world looks back: 'I see you'. If I am seen and acknowledged then I'm not vanishing in my darkness here. Talking about the dark thoughts is not about dwelling in the darkness, but rather about giving them light.*

*At times like these, it is important to know that someone is on the journey with you. To know that you have been heard and to know that someone is willing to walk with you, that you are not alone, can make all the difference. It is good knowing someone is on that journey with you.*

### **Doing hope with others**

*One of us thinks about the idea of hope not*

*just being a feeling but, rather, something people do. If others understood hope as something we do with others, then they would understand that by acknowledging when they see us in the dark times, this would be an act of doing hope with us. I think this may be linked to the African philosophy of ubuntu – which emphasises the self in community, in contrast to the Western emphasis on the individual.*

### **Connecting to others and to nature**

*Sometimes, when I get in a very bad spot, I think about how we are all connected and how we are all connected to nature. Then I wonder if I can think about the things I am connected to right now. I may be walking and I notice my contact with the earth. I might wonder about who may have travelled this same path, how this place looked in the spring or 20 years ago, or when the first person saw it. I think about my friend and what she might see if she was walking this path, or what my dad might imagine if I described this place to him. If I notice the wind, I might wonder where has it been on its way here, and what did it see, and where is it going? In the dark times, it helps to think about how we are all connected, and all connected to nature.*

### **'Keeping your shape'**

*We talked about finding ways to stay connected to what is important to us. One of us described a small act that helps her to 'keep her shape'. I put the song 'Some of my favourite things' on my cell phone so that when friends call, they hear the song as they are waiting for me to answer. It is my way of not just being this negative, energy-sucking entity. The song 'some of my favourite things' gives me my shape back.*

### **Using 'the power of now', the future, imagination and creativity**

*There are all these books about 'the power of now' and we believe that people who struggle with dark thoughts are the ones who should write these books. We are the*

*experts on the power of now! Some of the ways we use the power of now to get through the next hour or the next ten minutes include: focusing on a particular thing in the moment like a noise or the warmth of the sun, taking my dogs out or talking to my dogs, making a cup of tea, or doing something comforting. These are small acts of diversion. These are acts of reclamation. These acts claim moments of reprieve from the thoughts and their seduction.*

*One of us thought that we are the ones who know what it can take to get through the darkness – to find your creativity and imagination to make it to the next moment ... If I am really scared, sometimes I imagine that I am a huge bear or a big lion and that helps too. And imaginary friends ... well they are our friends!*

(For examples of stories of the histories of some of these skills, knowledges, and values, see below.)

## **STORIES OF THE HISTORY OF SKILLS, KNOWLEDGES, VALUES**

People's skills and knowledges have a history. After we had documented the women's ways of dealing with the suicidal voices, I deliberately enquired as to the histories of the skills and knowledges implicit within their acts of self-preservation. When I asked one of the women 'What is the history of this knowledge; where did you learn this?' she wrote two stories. The first of these relayed the history of how she knows about the 'significance of being heard'.

### ***A story about being heard and what it can mean***

*When I think about how I know of the significance of being heard, I am led into a memory of giggles from two little girls. Those giggles were soon to become*

*rib-busting and eye-watering uncontrolled hours of laughter as well as life-altering heartaches and shared tears. The world we shared was accepting, open, caring, and so very safe. Each day I felt heard and never alone.*

*I recall the day I first took a step into this world, unknowing at the time that this little girl sitting in front of my school desk would trigger an understanding and a direction in living that would last decades.*

*The rain was falling so that the larger-than-life windows of our grade one classroom became a sounding board for a steady patter of water that often became the rush of a wave across the pain.*

*It seemed visually orchestrated to announce the strength of the downpour. The maple leaves from the multitude of trees lining the street danced to the rain's presence, showing off their fantastic array of reds, yellows, and orange colours. This is recess and we are to be kept indoors for this fifteen minute interlude, to a day of thick pencils, workbooks, and chalk sounds on the blackboard. I felt my head shake back and forth as I realised we would not be going outside today. How could this be any fun? However, Mrs. M. brought out a box from her closet that held the most interesting assortment of puzzles and toys that I had ever seen. We get to play! Everyone stepped up to claim an item. I selected a wonderful puzzle of flat coloured pieces of shapes. I could create any picture I wanted. I sat down ready to begin when the girl seated in front of my desk began demanding her toy back from a boy who possessed the biggest eyes I had ever seen. He frightened me. I looked down at my wooden desk and eyed the ingrained dirt and pencil lead filling each surface scratch.*

*The classroom was loud as I listened to her small voice declare her rights to her toy (which I noted was a number of sticks of different sizes) as the boy closed those*

huge eyes and stuck his tongue out vigorously. She lowered her head in submission. I looked at her wondering how her hair held this perfect large curl of a ponytail – no rogue strands of hair falling like those my mother complained to me about. I knew her name was Rand and she had wonderful hair.

I looked back to the windows, losing track of the moment at hand and I briefly wondered why these widows needed to be so tall and who could even see up there. I looked forward again to be greeted by a funny smile looking questioningly at me. What could I do? I thought of demanding the toy for her or consoling her in her moment of loss. There was a moment of silence and I soaked in the smallness of her face, her dark playful eyes, and the tiny stature of her frame and the beautiful dark colour of her skin. She touched my forearm and I uncovered the colourful shapes on my desktop. She smiled and I grinned. 'That boy is mean and I can't get my toy back. He says it's his now'. I consolingly said, 'That's not fair. We can tell the teacher'. She replied with a shrug of her shoulders and said, 'I'd rather just play with you'. I had thought she wanted me to be tough for her but she just wanted to be heard.

That was the day that this little girl sitting in front of my school desk triggered an understanding and a direction in living that would last decades. Over time, with her, I learned the importance of equality and peace between all people. And later, as a teenager and beyond, I would feel the pull of the civil rights and peace movements. But that was the day when I first learnt about the significance of being heard.

The second story she wrote explains the history of when she first came to value 'having someone on the journey with you'.

### **The garden view: A story of having someone on the journey with you**

I remember a familiar moment when I viewed a garden from my back porch. My best friend and I were young children. I knew our friendship was special. On a Saturday afternoon, I talked with her as we watched the garden. It was a small patch of ground that sat unexpectedly in the middle of a yard full of trucks and piles of soil and gravel. My mother spent many mornings nurturing her plants of tomatoes, various vegetables, and pretty flowers. She told me she needed to keep the plants happy with water and safe from intruding weeds. She nurtured them well as if it would make a difference, as if she could create another view of her world literally and spiritually.

We looked at the best view before us: 'Taller Than Me' sunflowers. They stood in a row creating a living fence that shielded your eyes from the hard views of our family's trucking business. My best friend loved the sunflowers even more than I. When I asked her if her mom had a garden, she quickly explained that her mother was busy with her sisters and brothers. I thought about how small her house was, in a place called Tin Can Alley. I had an idea that the colour of her skin was why she lived where she lived, but I did not understand why it was a problem for everyone. We quietly continued sitting watching the large yellow-faced flowers look up at the sun.

Sometime after this peaceful afternoon, I was walking up the sidewalk to our back porch after a day at school. I passed my mother's garden. The sunflowers swayed in the late summer breeze. I thought they looked as free as they did during the early days of summer, but when I looked at the other plants, I saw they were limp and surrounded by weeds. It had been a while since I remembered my mom in the garden. The vegetables sat without a purpose and the flowers looked downward as if frowning. How did I not notice this before?



*There had been a change in my home – an absence of joy. Something had shifted and though I was not aware of what that was, I felt a sudden sense of being alone and frightened. It was in that moment that I knew my mother's view had changed. She was absent from the passion of today and a garden for tomorrow. My best friend and I would miss the sunflowers for the following seasons as the garden became absent from our yard. We were fortunate, however, that even though there was a change in the view and in our world, we continued to share the warmth of the sun and the safety of our friendship.*

## **FURTHER REFLECTIONS FOR US AS WORKERS**

I find the following questions helpful to reflect upon in order to ensure that I am engaging in double-storied conversations:

- Am I asking questions about how this person has been getting through the difficulties in a way that makes their skills and knowledges more visible to them and to me?
- Am I asking about how she has been sustaining hope through the difficulties (vs. offering hope)? For example, 'What are you doing, thinking, remembering that helps you sustain hope?'
- Are the answers to the questions I am asking providing an alternative territory of identity for the person to stand in (White, 2004; 2005) – a territory that makes it more possible for her to respond knowingly to questions of what would be helpful in this moment?
- Are the questions I am asking eliciting this person's skills and knowledges and, as such, making it possible for me to stay in a collaborative and hopeful position?

## **LINKING LIVES**

The process of writing and sharing documents started with the purpose of joining lives, and with the intention of reducing the profound sense of

isolation that these women were experiencing. The extracts below include the women's descriptions of the effects of joining with others who are experiencing similar difficulties.

## **EFFECTS OF LINKING WITH OTHERS FACING SIMILAR CIRCUMSTANCES**

### ***Sharing with others who know***

*After this, the voices can no longer say, 'You are the only one. What is wrong with you? Normal people don't think this way'. It makes a difference to know you are not the only one. It makes my experience not feel like an isolated experience. We have this lovely expression in my country that is something like, 'When a lot of people are sick or sad; there is comfort in knowing you are not the only one'.*

*Hearing about how others get through the dark times is like hearing words of hope. And her words have a lot more gravity than someone who wants you to 'be hopeful', someone who does not know the battle.*

*It feels better to hear about her experience. It is no longer a secret. This happens to other people. Just because they don't talk about it, doesn't mean it is not happening. At first as I listened to her words, I felt exposed and then I thought ... this is not me being exposed, it is the negative voices being exposed and this is the right thing! It is not shame on me, but SHAME ON THEM. They do this to others. I KNEW IT!! ... I am not the only one.*

Having witnessed the significance of linking people's lives in this way, I am now consistently asking myself: Is there a way I can link this person with others in a way that they know that they are not the only one?

## **RESONANCE/HEARING OUR WORDS READ BACK**

After the document was complete, the women, who had not met each other in person before, came together in my office. I read the collective

document out loud to them and here is what they had to say about the re-telling experience (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004; 2007):

*Having your own words read back to you in someone else's voice is different in a positive way because it brings out a curiosity in the words. It is like they are not my words and I feel curious about them. It is difficult to dismiss those words when you hear them read back by someone else.*

*I have to say that hearing my own statements, and the common themes and perspectives from another with similar experiences, is like catching knowledge and securing it.*

## ENABLING CONTRIBUTION

This process of 'catching knowledge and securing it' generates a renewed sense of personal agency – a sense that participants can make a difference in their own lives, and, perhaps also in the lives of others. Through this process the difficulties that people are facing become no longer theirs alone, and their experience of hardship and how they responded to this hardship can offer a contribution to others in similar or related circumstances (Denborough, 2008). Although it was difficult to think about the hard times and some of the responses of others, the women's hope in talking was that it could make a difference for others – 'If telling my story could result in these things not happening to just one person, it would be worth it'. This desire and commitment to make a difference for others is part of a history of actions of protest and resistance in the women's lives that reflects strong values for social justice. As we talked about these histories of protest, and how their recent speaking acts were connected to a passion for justice, the women began to discuss more fully some of the experiences they have had when seeking professional assistance. Here is some of what the women described:

### **Knowledge about the broader context: Experiences of help from professionals that is not helpful**

*We talked about the real effects of responses we have received from professionals when we have tried to talk about the suicidal voices. One response that makes it hard for us to risk telling someone is the 'now-I- have-to-act' mode. Sometimes, this results in professionals asking questions from what seems to be a checklist. When they complete the checklist, it is like they have done what they are supposed to do and then they seem to feel better. I wonder, where do they get this checklist?*

*We talked in some about our experience of practitioners' use of these assessment tools.*

*You start out with good intentions, to let someone know, with the hope that maybe someone can help. But when they start asking the questions from the checklist, by the second question I know I can't tell the truth. I start out with good intentions and then I start lying, just lying. I came because I felt trapped by the thoughts and now I feel trapped by the helpers. I'm already in this trap and I don't need a second trap. Just get me out of here.*

*When being asked standard questions, you do not really feel like you are in a conversation. They just seem random. And sometimes people can seem annoyed with you. You feel attacked by these questions that require an answer, the answer which they don't want to hear. In this context, how is it safe to answer?*

*You get the feeling that they are looking for a particular answer, the one answer that takes away your freedom. The answer that everything depends upon is the one to the question , "Do you have a plan?"*

## TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORK

It can be overwhelming for workers to know what to do when faced with people who are struggling against suicidal thoughts. Part of this is the legal context and part is a sense of urgency that workers can be invited into in the face of expressions of pain and despair. Workers can feel a pressure to produce evaluations that guarantee that people are safe.

One of the reasons conventional checklists or assessment tools are used pervasively is they provide professionals with a structure or guide to their conversations (Denborough, 2008). And yet, in talking with women who have struggled with suicidal thoughts it has become clear that they have had to deal with unintended negative effects of being asked questions by professionals from a standardised assessment tool. The women have powerfully described some of these negative effects, such as feeling trapped, evaluated, and judged, and disconnected from the other, and from their own knowledge and history.

The women's descriptions of unhelpful interactions with practitioners reflect Buckley and Decter's (2006) observation that 'psychiatric crisis can invite practitioners to prioritise their own ideas about problems and solutions above collaboration' (p. 3). Buckley and Decter suggest that practices of collaboration are crucial when responding to these kinds of crises, and offer a framework for remaining in collaborative and hopeful positions. My hope in offering an alternative framework to conventional assessment tools reflects my commitment to practise collaboratively when responding to people who are expressing pain and despair. One of the women expressed her preference for a collaborative response by stating:

'The questions [from the standardized assessment] make me crazy because questions are not what is helpful in the dark moments; questions are not what you need. I am thinking of the movie *Slum Dog Millionaire* and the TV show *Do you want to be a millionaire?* where the participants in the game show are offered 'lifelines' ... "You have three lifelines, which is the one you want to use right now?" In those dark moments we don't need those sorts of questions, we need lifelines!'

The following framework is not designed to be an assessment tool but rather a conversational guide to provide practitioners with:

- ways of understanding the experience of the psychiatric crisis (suicidal thoughts) and the pain that is part of this;
- ways of eliciting and acknowledging the initiatives that the person is taking to respond to the suicidal thoughts;
- an orientation that invites collaboration.

The following themes and some of the questions have emerged from the conversations I have shared with the women involved in this project.

### 1. Ask about the experience of the crisis

The women have offered some suggestions about what would be helpful: 'What would be helpful is for you to recognise that I am in pain and that you are willing to engage with me in understanding it. The thing I need most is to know that you are listening to me, that you believe me. Just believe that this is where I am. Don't change my language'.

Questions that could contribute to an understanding of women's experience and to separate them from the suicidal thoughts include:

- What would you call this problem [of suicidal thoughts]?
- Do you know what is leading to the problem having so much strength right now?
- What is this problem doing to you? How is it affecting you and your family? How is it affecting your thinking?
- What do you most need me to understand about how it is affecting you? Or others?

### 2. How have you been getting through?

Possible questions to elicit how the person has been responding, acting in opposition to the suicidal thoughts, and holding onto hope include:

- When the dark thoughts gain strength, are there certain things or people that sustain you?
- Are there places that are comforting?
- Are there people or pets that you turn to?

- Are there certain things you do, or certain things you think or notice that bring you comfort or safety?
- What would I appreciate about you in a moment when the thoughts were less present? What would you like me to know about your life or about what is important to you?

### 3. What can I offer you?

The following questions are offered as prompts to invite practitioners into a position of collaboration. There are many questions that can be asked to elicit what the person knows about what might be helpful:

- How is this conversation going for you?
- Is there someone I can call that you would like to be here with you?
- What is an important timeframe for you? Do you need help getting through the next hour, the next several hours, the next days?
- Do you need to be somewhere safe? What would be a safe place for you right now?
- Do you need someone to be with you?
- Do you need to sleep? Have you been sleeping? Do you need help to sleep for a couple of hours?
- Are you hungry? When did you last eat?
- What are you hoping that I can offer?

### 'THE SYSTEM NEEDS A CHECKLIST FOR ITSELF'

Listening to the women's stories, I was struck by their yearning to make a difference for others in similar circumstances, so that others do not have to experience what they have suffered. I know that their hope in telling their stories and documenting them in this paper is that their experiences and insider-knowledge might inform other professionals and influence agency policies and practices.

In response, I have created an alternative 'checklist'. The idea for this came from a comment from one of the women: 'The system needs a checklist for itself!' The checklist is simply a list of the reflective questions I have given throughout this paper, which flowed from the women's knowledge about what would make a difference.

### 'CHECKLIST' FOR REFLECTING ON OUR CONVERSATIONS

- Am I reminding myself of what it might have taken for this person to ask for help with the difficulties they are facing with the suicidal thoughts?
- Am I remembering how it can make a difference for people to talk about the effects of the thoughts – about the significance of being able to speak of the difficulties experienced and to know that someone is willing to hear?
- Am I engaging in a conversation that is making it possible for the person to put words to their experience of the effects of the dark thoughts – the pain and the difficulties faced without contributing to shame and blame?
- Am I asking questions in a manner that helps me see the person as separate from the problem? Am I asking questions about how this person has been getting through the difficulties faced in a way that makes their skills and knowledges more visible to them and to me?
- Am I asking about how she has been sustaining hope through the difficulties (vs. offering hope) in ways that will not lead to a sense of failure? For example, 'What are you doing, thinking, remembering that helps you sustain hope?'
- Are the answers to the questions I am asking providing an alternative territory of identity for the person to stand in – a territory that makes it more possible for her to respond knowingly to questions of what would be helpful in this moment?
- Are the questions I am asking eliciting the person's skills and knowledges and, as such, making it possible for me to stay in a collaborative and hopeful position?

It is my hope that such a checklist for reflecting on our conversations will support workers' desires and commitments to remain in a collaborative and hopeful position when responding to crises with suicidal thoughts.

## FINAL REFLECTIONS

My hope, and the hope of the women who participated in this initiative, is that this paper invites mental health practitioners to think differently about how we respond to those in crisis, and to question and dismantle the artificial separation between professionals and those who experience mental health crises at times in their lives.

As you have read this paper, it is my regret that you have probably gained only a very thin description, and incomplete understanding, of the women whose stories are contained here. You have read accounts of their lives that are connected only to the theme of the particular struggles that are the focus of this paper. As this article comes to an end, I wish you could 'see' these women more fully. I wish that you could 'see' them as I know them. I wish I could convey more clearly the strong and very significant contributions they make each day to their families, to their work, and to their communities.

For now, though, I hope that we have provided some preliminary ideas about ways of talking differently about 'the suicidal thoughts'.

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