

Suicide Prevention: On The Frontline

by Ethel Rohan

The Coalition of Irish Immigration Centers met on April 13-15 in Seattle, Washington to address the growing crisis of suicide in Irish Immigrant Communities in the United States. The conference opened on Friday with a full day seminar and workshop led by Liam McCarthy and Josephine Murphy, co-founders of the Personal Counseling Institute (PCI) College, Dublin. Liam and Josephine are considered leading figures in the field of counseling and adult education in Ireland, particularly in the area of suicide.

The goal of the Conference was to equip attendees with the tools to adequately respond to Irish immigrant members of their community who may be feeling isolated, depressed, hopeless and/or suicidal. The burdens of displacement and disillusionment can weigh heavily on Irish immigrants, questions of "who am I exactly?" and "where do I fit in?"

The number of Irish immigrants in America experiencing emotional and mental difficulties is growing, as is the rate of suicide in these communities. The same is true of people in Ireland and its immigrant communities. These alarming trends, particularly among young Irish men, are a major cause for concern.

Mental health disorders, especially depression, remain the highest risk factor for suicide. Life transitions and recent significant events, such as relationship problems, are also an important factor. Drugs, alcohol, and other addictions often play a role in suicide. Liam McCarthy remarked that a disconnection from a God or a higher power is also notable.

However, deaths by suicide are on the rise for people who do not fit these 'rule-of-thumb' profiles. More and more, individuals who exhibited none of the above signs, who appeared to "have it all", confounded their family, friends, and communities by completing suicide. Individuals that Liam McCarthy called "some of our brightest stars."

Clearly, every suicide is unique. What's also clear is that for those left behind, there are rarely, if ever, adequate answers to explain why a loved one would willingly take their own life - speculation is the closest we are going to get to understanding why.

What we do know is that, for whatever reasons, the suicidal person is blinded to an alternative to resolve their crisis (whether real or perceived) other than death. What is critical in suicide prevention is to deepen and reframe the way the suicidal person, and all of us, perceive suicide.

What alternatives other than death can we offer the suicidal person?

There is a critical need to improve the skills of Irish people, particularly Irish men, in dealing with mental, emotional and other problems in life. Irish people largely fail to reach out to others and ask for help, admit suffering. We seem stuck in limiting prescriptions of how we should behave, "men must be men" etc. and hide our true selves.

For those of us who battle with feelings of inadequacy it can be very hard to reveal our true selves. Feelings of hopelessness, of not being able to cope with everyday life, can be terrifying. Despair and becoming overwhelmed can make us feel like failures, make us believe that we're weak and shameful, going crazy. More disturbing still, many individuals in crisis can present a composed front to the world that belies their inner turmoil and makes their difficulties hard to detect and even harder to resolve. Liam McCarthy used the image of a swan gliding gracefully of the surface on the water, but underneath the legs paddle frantically.

What, though, if we saw our feelings of 'falling apart' as an invitation to stop and examine our lives, recognize what is and isn't working, an opportunity to understand ourselves better? What if it's only when we pay attention to the important messages inner suffering tell us that we can grow and change, live our life to its fullest?

We need to see the two sides of feelings of crisis and suicidal thoughts: the danger and the chance.

Nurturing a healthy mind gives us the best chance to live a full and contented life. There are many ways to turn feelings of sinking to feelings of buoyancy:

- * Talk about how you feel
- * Keep a journal, write about how you feel
- * Reach out to others
- * Seek professional help
- * Reach out spiritually to a higher power
- * Cultivate positive, nourishing relationships
- * Fully complete healing, such as grieving the loss of a loved one or confronting past trauma
- * Meditate/pray (or at least reflect on the inner self) for a while daily
- * Monitor your inner voice. When you talk to yourself, as we all do, what are you saying? How can you enrich the messages you tell yourself?
- * Maintain and enrich family relationships
- * Rid yourself of resentments
- * Exercise regularly
- * Get regular medical check-ups.
- * Consider alternatives and enhancements to Western medicine, e.g. acupuncture, Chinese herbs.

A critical step to enjoying a healthy mind is to look inward regularly and ask: How do I feel? Why do I feel this way? What am I chasing in life? What's chasing me? What keeps bringing me down? What can I do about it all?

Overall, the mood of this Conference felt hopeful. The incidence of suicide among the Irish, Irish immigrants, and immigrant communities in Ireland can be reduced. The key to such change is to equip the individual, particularly the Irish male, with the necessary skills to lead an open and full life, to allow and encourage them to be human. Our humanity requires us to feel deeply, to examine and express those feelings, and to act on them in the most nourishing ways possible.

Perhaps the most profound idea presented at this conference is the theory that connecting with a God or a higher power and getting to the truth of ourselves is one of the bravest and most enriching things we can do.

If you or anyone you know may be experiencing difficulties --feeling lost or depressed or overwhelmed-- please contact Celine Kennelly at the Irish Pastoral Immigration Center, San Francisco, 415-752-6006, or email iipc@pacbell.net. *All queries are confidential.*

You're not alone, and you don't have to suffer in silence any longer.

Turbulence is life force. It is opportunity. Let's love turbulence and use it for change.
--Ramsay Clark



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