

Suicide Prevention in the Deaf Community

By Brittany Purdy

Sunday, April 5, 2009

Suicide Prevention in the Deaf Community

Every Tuesday afternoon, I walk into the Suicide Prevention Crisis Line call room prepared to deal with the worst of situations. This one particular Tuesday, I noticed in the stack of procedure binders in the corner that there was a TDD manual. A TDD (also commonly referred to as a TTY) is a device that sends a typed message over phone lines. If the recipient does not have one of these devices, the caller can call relay operator who will read the message aloud to the person being called (pcmag.com). I remembered from training that if we were to deal with a Deaf caller, we were to look in this old, outdated binder. After talking to my supervisor about the manual and his own experiences with deaf callers, he suggested that instead of using the TDD machine, the caller should use a video relay service. After doing research on video relay services, I believe this is the best option for suicide prevention counselors when dealing with Deaf callers.

I asked a Suicide Prevention Crisis Line counselor, Liseanne Wick, if she had ever spoke with a Deaf caller who used a TDD machine and she said in her seven or eight years at the Crisis Line, she had never had a Deaf caller (Wick, 2009). My supervisor at the hotline, Jonathan Royer, mentioned he has only experienced one, possibly two Deaf callers in his fifteen years of answering phone calls. I immediately asked him what the call was like. "The TDD machine is old school. It's slow and all the emotions are sucked out, almost like an e-mail exchange."

At the Suicide Prevention Crisis Line, it is crucial that we are able to hear the caller's emotions so that we can better understand what they are going through and are more capable of helping them resolve some of their issues. If we are unable to hear their emotions, we are severely hindered in the call. Jonathan mentioned he had a conference call recently in his career where not until the end did he know he was actually communicating with a Deaf person through a video relay service because the interpreter was so incredible at expressing emotions (Royer, 2009). A video relay service (or VRS) is used when a Deaf or hard of hearing person uses a webcam to see a sign language interpreter who can also see the signer and then translates to the person on the other end of the telephone (CTAP, 2009). After speaking with Jonathan, it is clear to me the TDD manual should be thrown out and more video relay services should be used. If this happens, we can possibly prevent more suicides in the Deaf community through outreach since it appears many are unaware or choose not to call the hotline.

The Deaf community is at risk for suicide for several different reasons. According to researchers in the United Kingdom, it's believed a Deaf person has less social support, greater feelings of hopelessness, and a higher rate of depression which can all lead to suicide. Take, for example, a Deaf child born into a family who can hear; they have to overcome great obstacles. It should also be noted that there are about five to seven

suicides in the UK every year which means that there are many more people (about 150-400) who attempted suicide (SignHealth, 2007). Through outreach and better use of technology, we can prevent this from happening.

As video relay services become more popular, perhaps more people in the Deaf community will be willing to call Suicide Prevention if they are feeling suicidal or maybe even just a little depressed. Through a lot of outreach and greater support for deaf people, we can make a huge impact for suicide prevention.

References:

How to Make a Relay Call. California Telephone Access Program – Equipment (CTAP). 31, March 2009.

http://www.ddtp.org/california_relay_service/how_to_make_a_relay_call/default.asp#sts

PCMAG.COM. Definition of: TDD/TTY. Retrieved 24, March 2009.

http://www.pcmag.com/encyclopedia_term/0,2542,t=TDDTTY&i=52627,00.asp#

Royer, Jonathan. Supervisor at Suicide Prevention Crisis Line. Interviewed on 24, March 2009.

SignHealth. (2007). Deaf People and Suicide. Retrieved 24, March 2009.

http://www.signhealth.org.uk/documents/suicide_leaflet_v8.pdf

Wick, Liseanne. Counselor at Suicide Preventions Crisis Line. Interviewed on 24, March 2009.