

(Extract from “*LIFE* Framework – Areas for Action”).

Foreword

More than 2,500 Australians of all ages and from all walks of life die by suicide each year, and many more deliberately harm themselves. These acts are associated with profound distress, not only for the individuals themselves but also for their families, peers and community.

Living Is For Everyone (LIFE): a framework for prevention of suicide and self-harm in Australia provides a four-year strategic framework for national action to address this tragedy, to alleviate suicide and promote mental health and resilience across the Australian population. It is concerned with suicide in all age groups, with a particular focus on young people and young adults, for whom the loss of life years and potential is so great. Its development has been motivated by the high rates of suicide and suicidal behaviour among some age groups and populations, and the demonstrated capacity for health care and social interactions to influence individuals’ choices and behaviour.

The *LIFE* Framework offers a resource for workers and planners across a range of sectors, to inform them of national priorities and directions in suicide prevention and to broaden thinking to incorporate a suicide prevention focus. It has been prepared to inform agencies, organisations and governments at all levels, and will be of value to people in the community with an interest in suicide prevention, including families and volunteer and support networks, as well as to researchers and students.

The *LIFE* Framework has been developed by the National Advisory Council on Youth Suicide Prevention. This widely representative body has been advising the Commonwealth Minister for Health and Aged Care on suicide prevention policy and planning, to promote national coordination of suicide prevention programs and ensure that programs are based on the best available evidence. Each of the States and Territories is represented on the Council. The *LIFE* Framework will guide initiatives under the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) which continues and extends the directions of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (NYSPS, 1995-1999). While maintaining a commitment to suicide prevention for young people, it recognises and addresses the tragedy of suicide across all age groups. The new National Advisory Council for Suicide Prevention (NACSP) will reflect this lifespan approach. The NACSP will have a similar role to the NACYSP, with a greater emphasis on community participation in suicide prevention.

The factors that place people at risk of suicide and protect against it are many. Every suicide is different and there can be no single approach to prevention. Effective action therefore requires the involvement and cooperation of the whole Australian community, to work together to build resilience, resourcefulness, tolerance and capacity in communities and in people of all ages, to promote positive life options for those at risk of suicide.

The *LIFE* Framework promotes an emphasis on action by all Australians. It is an invitation to us all to discover opportunities to addressing this tragedy. This will include charitable organisations, all levels of government, the helping professions and many other groups concerned with the well-being of the community.

Partnerships and cooperation will be fostered, building on the many activities within the community that already contribute to suicide prevention (although often not recognised as such). The *LIFE* Framework draws on the experience of experts, agencies and workers in the field, and of individuals whose lives have been affected by suicide and mental health problems.

Living Is For Everyone (LIFE): a framework for prevention of suicide and self-harm in Australia consists of three companion documents:

- ***LIFE: Areas for action*** sets out the framework itself, including purpose, goals, guiding principles, and strategic performance indicators. Six broad areas for action are outlined including rationale, evidence base, partnerships, linked initiatives, strategies, process and longer term outcomes, and performance indicators.
- ***LIFE: Learnings about suicide*** leads the reader through the different levels and types of knowledge of suicide. Decisions about how to intervene to prevent suicide in the population as a whole, or in individual circumstances, must be made prudently, based on a clear understanding of the risk and protective factors for suicide, and with a watchful eye on the outcomes. Policy and practice must be based on strong evidence for an effective national effort. If this is not done, we run the risk that some well-intentioned programs may cause harm.
- ***LIFE: Building partnerships*** outlines programs and initiatives in government, human services and the community that are relevant to suicide prevention. Suicide cannot be prevented only by specialists in mental health or specialists in the particular problems of young or older people. Factors which bear on the incidence of self-harm and suicide are in our social environment, our community structures and relationships, in education, law and law enforcement, health services, alcohol and drug use, the media, entertainment and our culture. *LIFE: Building partnerships* is the Council's attempt to describe our partners in this enterprise. But there will be many others. We invite individuals, community groups and departments of government at the Commonwealth, State, Territory and local levels to inform us of what they are doing.

There is much to be learned about suicide and suicide prevention. The *LIFE* Framework aims to extend the knowledge base and understanding and in doing so will rely on open and ongoing dialogue with the community. To facilitate and contribute to this, you are invited to use the feedback forms which are included with each of the documents. Over the coming years, the directions in the document will be open and responsive to new information, ideas and evidence, to ensure that the *LIFE* Framework is as effective as possible in alleviating the tragedy of suicide across our society.

Professor Ian Webster AO
Chair,
National Advisory Council on Youth Suicide Prevention

A Framework for Action

Purpose and scope

The *LIFE* Framework provides a strategic framework for action at all levels, national, State and Territory, Commonwealth, local and non-government, to prevent suicide and promote mental health and resilience across the Australian population. It is concerned with suicide in all age groups, with a particular focus on young people. It does not address the issues of physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia, which raises separate ethical, legal and practical dilemmas.

Broad goals

The *LIFE* Framework has four broad goals. Reduce deaths by suicide across all age groups in the Australian population, and reduce suicidal thinking, suicidal behaviour, and the injury and self-harm that result. Enhance resilience and resourcefulness, respect, interconnectedness and mental health in young people, families and communities, and reduce the prevalence of risk factors for suicide. Increase support available to individuals, families and communities affected by suicide or suicidal behaviours.

To provide a whole of community approach to suicide prevention and to extend and enhance public understanding of suicide and its causes.

Guiding principles

Effective suicide prevention is underpinned by several principles, which have informed the development of this framework.

- Suicide prevention is a shared responsibility across the community, professional groups, non-government agencies and the government sectors.
- It requires a diversity of approach, targeting the whole population, specific population subgroups and individuals at risk.
- It must be evidence-based and outcome-focused.
- It must incorporate community and carer involvement and expert input.
- Activities must be accessible to those who need them, and appropriate and responsive to the social and cultural needs of the groups or populations they serve.
- They must be sustainable, to ensure continuity and consistency of service for communities, and evaluation must be an integral part.

It is crucial that activities do no harm. Some activities that aim to protect against suicide have the potential to *increase* suicide among vulnerable groups. Well-meant messages may cause harm because they may be interpreted differently by different groups. Awareness of this potential is of particular importance in programs that involve schools, the media or raising awareness of suicide. All approaches need to be market-tested and carefully evaluated for negative as well as positive outcomes. Suicide risk may also be inadvertently increased by programs outside the ambit of suicide prevention, that address broad social issues.

The *LIFE* Framework recognises the considerable contribution to prevention of suicide achieved by people helping each other at an informal level, particularly families and friends, especially in supporting those affected by suicide and self-harming behaviours.

It also recognises the importance of action and advocacy by consumer groups in enhancing service delivery systems and good practice, in ways that take into account feedback from consumers.

LIFE Action Areas

The *LIFE* Framework identifies six areas for action.

1. Promoting well-being, resilience and community capacity across Australia.
2. Enhancing protective factors and reducing risk factors for suicide and self-harm across the Australian community.
3. Services and support within the community for groups at increased risk.
4. Services for individuals at high risk.
5. Partnerships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
6. Progressing the evidence base for suicide prevention and good practice.

Considerations in planning activities

There is widespread agreement that suicide prevention should encompass a wide range of activities across a number of programs and sectors. It is useful, in planning activities, to consider:

- the purpose of the suicide prevention activity, which may range from responding to crisis or risk, through to health promotion;
- the target group, which may range from the whole population, through high-risk groups, to individuals;
- the evidence base for the effectiveness of many activities including where this is limited, to at least demonstrate a change in the estimated level of risk;
- the likely costs and benefits of a proposed strategy;
- its place and role in the overall field of suicide prevention including its nature, potential scope, boundaries and limitations; and
- a collaborative approach including relating to others to provide a more integrated and effective approach.

In selecting a focus for activities, planners should consider not only the strength of a particular risk factor for individuals, but also how common it is in the community. Activities that focus on a relatively rare factor that places an individual at high risk may have a smaller effect on overall suicide rates than a program that focuses on a lower-risk but relatively common factor.