

WHY SOCIAL CONNECTION MATTERS FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION

(Lauren Sheriff and Prof Clifford Stevenson, NTU)



Suicide remains a major issue, both globally and locally, despite years of investment in prevention and support. Loneliness is now recognised as a key risk factor: many people who experience suicidal thoughts describe feeling disconnected, unsupported, and as though they do not belong anywhere. Each year, around 727,000 people die by suicide worldwide, and many more struggle with suicidal thinking without coming to the attention of services. This highlights the need to focus not just on crisis response, but on what protects people in everyday life.

One of the clearest messages from recent work by PhD candidate Lauren Sheriff at Nottingham Trent University is that suicide risk is shaped by people's social worlds as much as individual factors such as history of depression or financial issues. Her research shows that many individuals accessing the suicide crisis support services of Nottingham's Harmless report a lack of close relationships, difficulties opening up to others, and a sense of not being part of a meaningful group. Without these connections, people are more vulnerable to feelings of isolation, hopelessness, and being trapped.

At the same time, relationships and groups can offer powerful protection. Being part of supportive networks such as family, friendship groups, or community organisations can provide a sense of belonging, purpose, and identity, as well as practical support during difficult times. Lauren's research shows that as people's relationships improve, their suicidal thoughts and planning tend to reduce. A key part of this is hope: when people feel more connected, they are more likely to feel positive about their future, which can make a crucial difference at moments of crisis.

Services like Harmless's Tomorrow Project show how this works in practice. Many clients come into support feeling alone and without anyone they can rely on, sometimes alongside difficult or unhealthy relationships. Often, the first step is simply being listened to and taken seriously. For some, this is the first time they have felt valued and understood, which can immediately reduce feelings of isolation.

However, the aim is not just to provide short term support. A central part of the work is helping people rebuild their wider social connections. This can mean reflecting on which relationships are supportive and which are not, letting go of harmful ties, and building new connections. It may also involve practical steps, such as helping someone feel confident enough to attend a group or activity for the first time.

The key takeaway is that recovery is not just an individual process. People recover through reconnecting with others and finding a sense of belonging again. Strong group connections provide stability, support, and a buffer against future challenges.

For those working across local government, health, and the voluntary sector, this has clear implications. Suicide prevention is not only about identifying risk and responding to crisis. It is also about creating opportunities for connection by supporting community groups, reducing barriers to participation, and ensuring that people have places where they feel they belong.

In short, loneliness increases risk, but connection builds protection. Strengthening group connections may be one of the most effective ways to prevent suicide and support long term recovery.

(Note: Lauren Sheriff is currently undertaking a PhD on group protective factors in suicide recovery at NTU. The project is funded by the NTU Co(I)laboratory initiative and supervised by Prof Clifford Stevenson)