

Towards zero suicide

How to build resilience in people presenting with non-medical crises



By Elanore Moseley



The fact that he answered the phone told me he wanted to live

I'm at work. The phone rings...

It's a work coach from the jobcentre. An angry customer was escorted out by the police. She's worried about him and contacts Inclusion Cornwall (IC) to see if we can help.

She rang IC because we offer people in need and supporting professionals telephone advice about where and how to access services. We're non-statutory and I've coordinated the IC hub for six years, responding to over 15 000 enquiries. We also manage a resource network with over 430 frontline members. Find out more at www.inclusioncornwall.co.uk.

Cornwall has one of the highest suicide rates in the UK (ONS 2018) and IC is experiencing an increase in suicidal people presenting with non-medical crises. In response we're evolving the way we work; stabilising crisis needs whilst also helping to build future resilience.

We've had very successful outcomes and I was asked to present an overview of our four-stage approach at the Towards Zero Suicide conference in Cornwall recently. It's this approach that I'll present here, set against the backdrop of a real case study.

I ring the customer...

He's extremely angry and tells me he's standing on the edge of a cliff; he plans to kill himself.

Coming from a background that includes 20 years working with complex customer groups and training in areas such as NLP and psychotherapy, I was the best person in the IC team to take this call. I had no doubt this man posed a risk to himself but the fact that he answered the phone told me he wanted to live.

I invite him to talk...

He's sleeping in his car after losing his marriage, his job and his home. He's never claimed benefits before and had gone to the jobcentre expecting to get more help than he was offered. He describes feeling unheard, frustrated and judged.

1. Break it down

The first thing we do is break the situation down. When people are in crisis they tend to present with multiple issues pinched and knotted around each other. What feels overwhelming from this perspective can feel manageable when broken into its component parts. IC refers to these parts as multipliers; factors which may make it more difficult for someone to feel resilient. In our model the higher the multipliers the lower the resilience, eg if a single parent borrows £25 from family and can't pay it back there are not likely to be significant consequences. But if that same person has no family network and borrows from a loan shark the future trajectory could be very different. The combination and number of multipliers (single parent, immediate financial need, no support networks) affects that person's available choices. The narrower the path ahead the less we may feel in control. Arguably it's this feeling of not being in control that affects our emotional resilience.

In the case study the multipliers are homelessness, relationship breakdown, mental ill health, financial need, job loss and identity loss.

I move to solution mode...

There are numerous support services nearby. I'm confident we can help but he's blocking suggestions and getting angrier.





2. The pinch point

It isn't unusual for someone to resist solutions. Imagine the pinched knot again. You've already loosened it by pulling apart the multipliers but it can easily re-tighten if you aren't careful. Many complex knots can be undone in one pull if you know where to tug. I've found the same to be true of people in crisis. There are rarely quick solutions but there *can* be a quick jump from someone feeling overwhelmed to feeling able to cope if we find the right place to start.

I test for the point at which the person lets me move beyond and to a solution. If they keep looping to a block I know it isn't the right place to start. This skill can be built with experience but even when skilled be mindful of making assumptions. It would have been easy to assume that money or housing was the pinch point for this man. It was actually identity loss. He identified as a loner, never asking for help. He didn't know how to relate to himself in this situation. The trigger for his anger was feeling judged in the jobcentre.

We talk for a while...

He gives himself permission to accept help and agrees to go back to the jobcentre. I negotiate with the work coach to give him another chance. I arrange for crisis funding and I make referrals for housing and employment support.

3. Foster community

The skill set required for finding help can only be built within community. Our resource network feeds me information about available support and instantly provides 430 experts dotted around the county. I don't need to be able to provide the help. I just need to know who to ask. When the ideal solution isn't available I'm honest about what can be achieved and I move to the next best option.

In this case I knew a local group with access to crisis funding. The people I contacted about housing and employment are part of my network, and so I had the solutions to hand.

Not everyone will have the time to build such comprehensive links but you can extend your own community in smaller ways. Find local networks or, if you work in Cornwall, give IC a call!

I ring the next day...

He's been to the jobcentre and made a benefit claim. He speaks positively about his work coach and has joined an employment support programme. He reached out to a friend and is staying with him.

4. Build capacity, not dependence

When building resilience it's vital to resist the urge to rescue. You'll reinforce that they can't manage, have little impact on that person's future ability to cope and you won't see clearly enough to help. The whole reason the pinch point works is because you are focusing on the minimum required to free up that person's ability to take control; giving just enough support to enable but not so much as to dis-able.

Two weeks later the phone rings...

He's started a full-time job and is saving for his own place. His voice is brimming with pride and he's talking positively about his future.

In this case study our four-stage approach worked perfectly but it's worth saying that this is a test-and-learn model; we continually adapt to suit the situation. I didn't have to do much to enable an increase in resilience. By focusing on what was important we quickly found the pinch point which enabled him to feel in control. We broke things down and I used my network to build a support community around him. Ultimately, he didn't need to use this community for long because he felt enabled.

The best outcome is when someone feels as if they did it all themselves and they don't even remember you helped. I hope the man in the case study has forgotten all about me and his day on that windy cliff top in Cornwall. ●

