



**Union of Students in Ireland**

*Aontas na Mac Léinn in Éirinn*

Submission to National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP)

June 2014

**"The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the sole representative body for students in Ireland and represents 354,000 students in over thirty member colleges across Ireland, North and South. Throughout its history, USI has worked relentlessly in the pursuit of student rights in all areas of the student experience."**

Currently, youth suicide rates in Ireland are fourth highest in the European Union (National Office for Suicide Prevention, Annual Report 2012). The many and complex theories that surround the act of suicide can sometimes distance us from the simple idea that no one takes their own life unless there is something very wrong with it. It is often said that suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary situation. Many survivors of suicide attempts speak of their desire to end the deep and desperate pain they felt, not necessarily to end their lives (Taking Control of Your Mental Health, Shine, 2009).

It is necessary to recognise the opportunity to influence attitudes to suicide prevention of young people whether it is in a third level setting or through youth groups or sports clubs, by doing this, the young people who will move on to working life with an open attitude to mental health issues and suicide prevention.

We believe the stigma surrounding suicide prevents people from coming forward and seeking the help and support they need. It also means we are prevented from understanding the voices of those experiencing mental health issues and suicidal thoughts (Taking Control of Your Mental Health, Shine, 2009).

We must recognise the need to engage with young people where they are looking for information and support that is outside of the school/college setting. According to the My World Survey, 77% of young people surveyed reported they would be likely to use the internet as a source of help. In addition to this the young people were asked about ways that help them cope when things are tough. The most frequently reported ways of coping were friends, talking, music, family and exercise. We must use this when engaging with young people.

We must commend the work being done by various organisations, groups and services that continue to reach out and play a vital role in suicide prevention and provide quality services even in times where much needed funding and resources are unavailable.

We truly believe everyone has a role to play in suicide prevention, please see the USI's recommendations to the new framework.

## **USI's Recommendations**

### **1. Joined up thinking & collaborative approach**

A collaborative approach with joined up thinking on a local and national level is a desired approach from USI. We believe messages and campaigns on suicide prevention must be far reaching and is completed in a collaborative way. We believe it is vitally important that mental health and suicide prevention groups and organisations work in partnership together. If there is a campaign aimed at young people we would recommend that groups such as USI would be encouraged to get join and support the campaign due to its reach of over 354,000 students in Ireland. We also recommend that if there are advisory groups or committees within the National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) that there is a seat made available for youth/student representation.

### **2. Targeted social media campaign**

According to the My World Survey, 77% of young people surveyed reported they would be likely to use the internet as a source of help. It is vital we are reaching out to young people where they are searching for information and support. We recommend that the National Office for Suicide Prevention would coordinate and fund a specific targeted campaign that would use social media as a platform to engage young people on the issue on suicide prevention, the signs of suicide, how to support those around you and look after yourself.

### **3. Supporting Please Talk and it's message**

In addition to the above recommendation, Please Talk was founded in UCD in 2007 after a number of student suicides, this campaign has progressed over the years and as student representatives we believe in the positive effects Please Talk can have in engaging students. The Please Talk message, 'Talking is a sign of strength' is simple and positive as well as being recognised by students. USI has played a significant part in Please Talk's workings in the last number of years and are prepared to continue with this contribution. Furthermore pleasetalk.org acts as an ideal tool in signposting on campus services for students. We recommend that the new framework includes provision to continue supporting the Please Talk campaign.

#### **4. Local Suicide Prevention Committees**

As USI works with many Students' Unions we can appreciate that each community is different and what works well in one area may not work well in the next. We also acknowledge that, like within third level settings, the community around you is so very important especially in the incidence of a suicide occurring. We recommend that the National Office for Suicide Prevention investigates the possibility of setting up suicide prevention committees in communities that can be led by the local HSE resource officer and our local representatives. Suggestions for membership of these committees would be: HSE Resource Officer, Local Councillor, Gardaí, Representatives from local school, student representative from local third level institute (if applicable), member of the clergy and members of local family resource centre etc. This committee would oversee suicide prevention efforts in the community and in the event of a suicide would work together in providing immediate support to all in the community. We feel that a collaborative localised approach and the inclusion of local representatives would be extremely beneficial.

#### **5. Develop and expand partnerships with GAA, IRFU & FAI**

Sport can be a vehicle in the community for change. As you can see in Appendix 1, one of our colleagues gives an account of when their friend took their own life and the use of sports clubs in suicide prevention was mentioned. We recommend that the National Office for Suicide Prevention expand its relationship/partnership with the GAA, IRFU & FAI in developing suicide prevention programmes with various sports clubs across the country. This could also be replicated in sports clubs within Third Level Settings. We have seen recently when sports players open up about their mental health they become role models for people, there is a need to expand on this. We would ask that you encourage clubs to coordinate self care sessions and sessions on mental health wellbeing for players and encourage peer to peer support.

# **Appendices**

## **Appendix 1:**

### **'David' submitted by Helen Campbell, Welfare Officer, IT Sligo Students' Union**

It was a normal Christmas like any other. Friends and family gathered throughout the holiday season. Drinks were consumed, food was eaten and not a care in the world amongst our wide circle of friends or so we thought. I remember it vividly as I was going to Wicklow to attend a 21<sup>st</sup>. I got into my car and it wouldn't start. I rang my friend and she told me she would bring me to get a bus. I text her later and told her I didn't need her lift. She rang me straight away and said "you know so" I was confused told her that I had gotten another lift. To this day I will never forget the next few words she uttered "David is dead. He hung himself". I will never forget that feeling. The pain that erupts inside you. It's almost like you can see everything happening but a paralysis takes over your body.

The next few days were a blur filled with many tears, lots of laughter and hundreds of unanswered questions. Questions that will never be answered. Anger turned to tears, tears led to anger. Why? was the question on everyone's lips? Only one person could answer those questions and he could no longer answer us.

New Year's Eve was upon us. Many friends text to see what my plans were for the night but they received a short reply. As many people rang in the New Year with family and friends consuming alcohol and dancing to their hearts content, my friends and I sat at David's wake consuming tea and sandwiches sharing stories. As happy people crossed arms and sang Auld Lang Syne we sat saying the rosary. Nothing in life can prepare you for that situation, nothing. But it could have been avoided.

David was a typical male. Twenty four years of age. He had travelled and seen the world in his short years. He had just bought a new car. He had a job and girlfriend, an active social life and a wide circle of friends. There were no signs. The only thing about David was that he fell into a category. A young male category.

Young males are known for bottling up their feelings. I feel that there needs to be a "desire to seek help" promoted. Use local GAA clubs and sports clubs, schools and jobs. Make it possible for young males to share their feelings. Break down the barriers to allow young men to open up. Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Take care of yourself and take care of others.

**Appendix 2:**

**My World Survey - National Study of Youth Mental Health.**

**Dooley, B. & Fitzgerald, A (2012) Headstrong and UCD: Dublin**

Available at:

<http://www.headstrong.ie/sites/default/files/My%20World%20Survey%202012%20Online.pdf>

**Appendix 3:**

**More Talk, More Action - USI Mental Health Strategy 2014**

Available at:

[http://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/More-Talk-More-Action-Strategy-2014\\_Final-1.pdf](http://usi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/More-Talk-More-Action-Strategy-2014_Final-1.pdf)

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