

Promise to tackle the killer in our midst

by Keri Welham



A Better Life: Sheree Veysey felt the grip of depression at 14. Now she works in peer support. Picture: ROSS GIBLIN

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New Zealand's suicide rate has fallen about 20 per cent in the past decade, but 500 people still kill themselves each year. Now the Government has introduced a five-year action plan in the hope of bringing down the toll.

SHEREE VEYSEY was 14 when depression descended; suddenly and with a frightening grip. "It was like all the colour had been sucked out of the world, and nothing tasted good any more."

The Auckland peer support worker — aged 27, grinning, bubbly and wearing a bright green shirt — was in Wellington last week for the launch of a five-year strategy to combat suicide.

Ms Veysey tells her story on an interactive youth depression website, *The Lowdown* (thelowdown.co.nz), alongside celebrities such as Hurricanes back Ma'a Nonu, actress Antonia Prebble and musician Scribe.

In the three months after its launch in December, the website recorded 43,000 visits and the Lifeline team monitoring the site called emergency services to intervene in 17 attempted suicides.

The Lowdown was one of four initiatives highlighted at the launch of the New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2008-12.

Associate Health Minister Jim Anderton said the action plan amounted to "a promise". New Zealand's suicide rate has fallen 19 per cent in a decade, but 500 Kiwis still end their own lives each year, and Mr Anderton said the new action plan would include details of every action to help curb the death toll, the timeline and the government department that would be held accountable.

"It is a promise. It means someone can be made responsible and accountable."

The action plan outlines seven goal areas, such as care for those who have attempted suicide and reducing access to the means of suicide. Another of the goals is concerned with safe portrayal of suicide in the media. The plan extends the usual focus on news media to include fictional portrayals, such as the high profile suicide of *Shortland Street* character Joey Henderson this month.

Drama students will be targeted, just as journalism students are offered information about what academics say are the potential effects of irresponsible news reports of suicide.

Health Ministry staff will also monitor international efforts to mitigate harmful content on Internet sites.

Mr Anderton told *The Dominion Post* he had commissioned research on the effects of media reporting on suicide in a New Zealand context, in recognition of the fact that the only studies available related to communities vastly different from Kiwi towns and cities.

The research should be available in the next year.

SEEKING HELP

THOSE in crisis, or those concerned about someone who may be in crisis, can call these confidential helplines:

LIFELINE 0800-543-354
SAMARITANS 04 473-9739
DEPRESSION HELPLINE
0800-111-757

Signs someone may be contemplating suicide:

- Isolated or withdrawn behaviour
- Giving away possessions
- Talk of suicide and death
- Statements of worthlessness
- Mood changes
- Abandoning personal health and appearance
- Wanting to be alone

- Bullying or being bullied
- Reckless behaviour.

Take seriously any comment, regardless of how offhand.

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