

TRANSCRIPT for Series 2, Episode 6: Suicide Prevention in Asia (airdate April 2021)

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Intro

Welcome to *A World Where LivingWorks*, stories of science and survival bringing together our heads and our hearts to build a suicide safer world, talking openly about suicide is so important but we also recognise that listening to this series may bring up some tough emotions, if so please talk to a trusted family member, friend or local support service about how you are feeling.

Visit livingworks.net and click on 'FIND SAFETY' for international crisis services, we are there to help you.

This podcast is brought to you by LivingWorks, a network of local suicide first aid trainers in your community and communities around the world visit livingworks.net to find out how you can play your part in suicide prevention.

Kim Borrowdale

You're listening to *A World Where LivingWorks* and I'm your host Kim Borrowdale.

First of all I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the beautiful lands wherever you're listening, I'd also like to acknowledge everyone out there who has been impacted by suicide, the pain it brings to our lives but also the desire to make positive change for all of us to live well.

Today I'm talking with Professor Paul Yip from Hong Kong. Professor Yip is the Associate Dean of Research of the Faculty and Social Sciences at Hong Kong University, the Chair Professor of Population Health at the Department of Social Work and Social Administration and then the Director of the HKJC Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention.

Paul's current research interests involve population health issues including poverty alleviation, adopting the public health approach in suicide prevention, restriction of needs, cost effectiveness of suicide prevention and program evaluation, a very warm welcome to you Paul, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

Professor Paul Yip

Yes, it's my pleasure to join

KB

For our listeners around the world Paul, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about suicide as a public health issue in Hong Kong and wider Asia if you like, just so we can understand suicide and it's prevention in a local context for you

PY

Yes, I think based on the WHO latest suicide report there's 800,000 people kill themselves every year and then actually 70% are occurring in this part of the world, in Asia or South Asia and on top of it, it is the leading cause of death among the young people unfortunately I think the resources, I think to do with suicide prevention it is much less I think than the Western countries, furthermore I think it is also have more challenges in terms of not only the availability of the medical services but it is also talking about the stigma, I think arising about mental health and also the health seeking behaviours, I think these are the major challenges, I think when suicide prevention in Asia or even in Hong Kong

KB

And why do you think there is a stigma around talking about mental health in Hong Kong?

PY

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Well I think it is the awareness of the mental health I think is not as important as the most important physical health, the mental health is always have this sort of stigma the way that it is, the people have something wrong, I think what we have experiences, if you try to raise some funding for the cancer patient it is a piece of cake, it's not difficult to raise millions of dollars, there are people that open their heart, open their wallet, come to contribute to help these people who have the cancer but when you try to raise money for the depressed people I think that become a bit challenging because you thinking well there is something wrong, I mean there nut's so there are a lot of lack of awareness of the problem, and then this lack of awareness will lead to somehow stigma about the depression even if they themselves I think they have a problem sometimes they do not have confidence that the other people can help them, so actually that ability or the motivation to seeking help is very low because of this one you have the lack of knowledge, you have the stigma then there is also some prejudice I think in the community, I think we have been talking to the medical health people of the people who are treating the self-harm people, they are actually, have less empathy, oh these people are deliberate self-harm themselves, they are wasting the medical health resources, so I think these sort of things is really like a change you know, the lack of knowledge, from the stigma, from the prejudice and then it leads to discrimination, so I think one thing that is very important why we do the suicide prevention is not only we need to create more resources which is very important, I mean at the same time I think change the mindset, change of the culture or how we perceive the mental health and then try to let them know that in seeking help it is not a sign of weakness, it is a sign of strength because you realise that you have problem and that you're willing to come and into seeking help, so I think if we can do that and then I think we will have a better chance that we can make a difference.

(5:36)

KB

Absolutely and I think Asia is not alone in trying to solve the problems about stigma and raising awareness and reduction of prejudice. What are you seeing happening, what practical things are in place to help with both that side of things and also training for people to deal with it better in the workplace, in the mental health services?

PY

Well I think it's important, I think for everybody to realise that a better mental health in the community it is good for everyone, I mean as you might know in Hong Kong or in Asia they have a very hard work attitude, you know they work long hours and which is totally not really good for their mental health and some of the employer also are not sympathetic I mean they really work you very hard and (UNCLEAR – 6:23) that does not actually very cost effective, I mean in saying that I think because of the mental health problem leads to absenteeism and also the presenteeism too, I mean the presenteeism, now we know that absenteeism is for people who are not well they cannot go to work but the presenteeism is even worse, it's actually go to work but their mental wellness is not that good, in actual fact they are wasting the time, so in actually it is very demoralising and it's actually bad to the employer and to the employee as well, I think it is important I think for the employer to remember to create a mental health friendly working environment and then people can come in, they can feel they are being treasured, they are being valued and that their voice is being heard and then at the end I think productivity, I think it will goes up, I think that is very important, when we talk about workplace mental wellness promotion.

KB

That's a really good point in terms of selling it in to workplaces in an environment where that hard working culture is so strong actually a nice way of selling that to employers is the productivity angle, it makes sense from a dollars and cents point of view, as well as people's personal sense of empathy and responsibility towards their employees.

PY

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Well I think we have done a study on the quarter social return on investment SROI calculation, that when you put one policy and promoting the mental wellness of your worker it actually, there's a study to suggest that it leads to more than \$10 of their output, so this is a good business, I think when you talk about business because the more the employer worry about why should I spend the money on this because it leads to productivity and when I give you good (UNCLEAR – 8:29) some investment from his side you can justify, hey by you having this it will lead to I think better productivity and that will be good.

KB

And what about training of people working in the health services, have you seen an increase in suicide first aid training for people in those roles?

PY

Yes, I think in Hong Kong we have seen an increase awareness I think in the workplace, so we like to promote more training to the healthcare and also the teaching professionals because I think there is a lot of teachers, I think they are concerning about not because I do not want to care for my school children but they are very busy and two they do not have the sufficient training, I think what happens in Hong Kong, our centre has been responsible to provide the trainings for this mental wellness promotion skills among the school teachers and it is very important, I think all this training or all this program is just an entry, a key to change the overall wellbeing of the mental wellness of the school but the program itself it doesn't change, but it (UNCLEAR – 9:44) I need to get into the school and hopefully through this program we can change the mindset of the people, raising the awareness, change the mindset, let them buy in and subsequently lead to the behavioural changes. So don't put all the faith in the program, you do not (UNCLEAR – 10:03) if you do not have the support personnel, if you do not have a supporting principals, it is not going to work, by the same token, in the healthcare sector we have a similar situation, we're moving from what we call medical care model to a community based model, let the community itself, I think will be a safety net, I think to help these people who are in need because those people who are depressed or are not well, they have a very no motivation, they have a very low initiative right, so what we need to do, going back to the community, we are the gatekeepers training them and hopefully by then you have much more chance to be able to engage these people

(10:44)

KB

So then you have less people actually needing the hospital services as such because hopefully it's more community driven at that earlier stage.

PY

Yes, I think the whole idea of the public health approach is the move away from a clinical and medical model to a community based model and as we move away from an illness model, illness prevention to the wellness promotion, I mean there a lot of time we spent, a lot of money I think on this healthcare system, hopefully we have a good screening system, we can have early intervention and these are important but that only for a very small group of people who are on the tertiary level, they need some special skill but at the end of the day, it's the community at large, if we can help them to improve their mental wellness, actually their impact on the overall wellbeing we'll be much better than just concentrating on the very small group of people at the high risk

KB

I like what you have to say too course is just the key so you see people doing one mental health first aid course or a suicide first aid course and then that's it for the year, but it's actually about changing the entire environment as you say and that's the start of your journey in shifting those mindsets not the one course and it's all fixed now

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PY

Yeah I mean as we learn in Hong Kong we have been doing this school program for so many years, all the school teachers saying that we fed up with the program, we have too many program, you just overwhelm us, you make us even busier, you know, it's actually add to their mental health, so what they're saying is, hey, we need a program to come in to kickstart the thing and such that they can really do the capacity building, it's not out of the program finish and everything go back to square one, so we like to through the program doing the capacity building, build them up and let them to fully embrace this mental wellness in the whole curriculum, so it's not only just for some particular student who special problem what we like to do is promote this mental wellness across the whole school, where the school curriculum has activities where everything we put the mental wellness as a top priority and I think that is something we should (UNCLEAR – 13:10)

KB

Absolutely, it should be every focus of every aspect, you know how can we achieve in any other area of our academia or sporting lives without mental wellness and I love the strength focus rather than you know, you need to support the unwell but actually focusing on the strengths of mental wellness is such a positive way to approach it. And what about Paul, I know you've done a lot of work with the media and researching public health messaging around this, have you seen a shift in how the community is actually receiving those messages in the media about suicide and it's prevention or mental wellness?

PY

Yes, I think we have seen some encouraging changes in Hong Kong, I mean I heard about the suicide prevention researcher they say that they hate the media professional and they are just people you cannot talk to but what happened I think we have to take some time to understand the working behaviour of the journalists of the media professional, once you start to understand their constraint and you also give them the opportunity that hey you can be one of our partners or co-workers in suicide prevention because when the media professional they have a motive for their work, do no harm right, exactly what we like to do, you do not a very good reporting of the suicide news it actually does some harm and you do some harm and actually you need to protect those people but the way how you do it, it actually may be hurting the people. What we have done, we've been collecting some data, I think we have been shown that when you have a very excessive or sensational reporting of the suicide news and then we demonstrate that there is an excessive suicide immediately after that because when they see the (UNCLEAR – 15:06) and then they also do that huh am I really contributing to this, so then we bring in the professional to explain to them, bring the psychiatrist, bring the clinical psychologist and such we can form a team having to work together what is admissible and what is not admissible right, but for us we give them the ten commandments, thou shall not do this, and thou shall not do this and then what happens, they couldn't do anything, I follow all the ten commandments, there's no news, as a matter of fact there's no news but we can also be in their shoes they need to have some news, so what we have done, we have created a booklet recommendation of the media reporting, now we do not say it is guidelines, when it is a guidelines it means you teach them how to do the job but when you say recommendation, it is a very cordial way to share our knowledge and we also very much learn from them as well, so other than now we have a very good working relationship so now if there is any suicide news now, they call us up and ask us for real news and what we think about this and how should we explain to the public on this, so I think that is very good.

Now we also move from the printed media to the social media, so now I'm not sure especially the young people they read any newspaper now, so they all go to the internet to get the information but actually where that information on the internet come from, sometimes it's from printed media too, so they are not too mutually exclusive, they are dependent.

Whenever we can get some good thing printed in the printed media, they will be shared in the internet too and also we talk to the KOL the key opinion leader and we engage them as a way to be a mental health ambassador too, so actually when they say something it's much more effective than when (UNCLEAR – 17:05) say

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something, so the KOL has a lot of followers, right for me, I only have three for myself but they have ten thousand or fifty thousand so we need to make use, they are our partners in promoting in mental health

(17:21)

KB

Fantastic and I know it can be difficult at times to work in suicide prevention because you know, it's high numbers and as you said really concerning rates of young people taking their own lives but what I ask everyone on this podcast is, what gives you hope when you look at suicide prevention?

PY

Yes, we have been working on this research for the past near twenty years and there are people that said, oh hey Paul how can you put up with all this very sad thing and yeah indeed it is very sad, I mean when we see the young people they jump off the building, you see family suicide, there's the suicide pack, it's very sad but what we see is every time we see this we try to learn something from it, we try to turn the table around and then we try to prevent a future tragedy to come, so if we continue to do this then somehow we be energisers, say hey we are do some good, we are hoping to make a difference, so, so far I think we're very fortunate I think to be getting the endorsement from the government, of a lot of people and then we work together so our suicide rate in Hong Kong it has gone up from twelve hundred thousand to eighteen hundred thousand in two or three but now it has come down to just below one hundred thousand now, so the important thing, just to let the people know that hey suicide is preventable right, yes there are some hardcore suicide which is right but the substantial portion of it they are preventable and we all part of this effort, so I think it's important in not lose the hope in the community that suicide is not the only way to solve the problem, actually when you suicide and the people who are suffering from this we do not blame you, we know that you have a lot of problems but it is ok to seeking help and as I said before, seeking help is not a sign of weakness, it's a sign of strength and it's ok not to be ok, so we come forward and hopefully I think we are seeing the changes now but some of the bigger problems, I mean the young people are facing now, like the breakdown of the family support, divorce families, single parent families, (UNCLEAR – 19:46) the hope among the young people, we can tell by social media, the internet addiction I think all those sorts of things, they make our suicide prevention more challenging right, I will not say more difficult, but more challenging but I do believe that with (UNCLEAR – 20:02) the efforts of the stakeholders in the community and we can see the change, we have seen the change and now we are going to make more changes

(20:10)

KB

That is so motivating Paul, I love that because we are all in it together and I really like that we can spend so much time talking about mental health services and hospitals and things like that but I really appreciate how you focus on the community side of things and we all have a role to play and it's ok if we're not ok and we can help each other. Is there anything else that you would like to share with our audience today about the work that you're doing in Hong Kong.

PY

Well I always am amazed by the (UNCLEAR – 20:43) suicide prevention from many parts of the world from Australia, LivingWorks you have been doing wonderful things, I think we have started some initiative our of promotion, promotional online support system for young people who don't want to call now just spend on the internet and we try to engage them in it, so one thing I just hope that to share with the reader that suicide prevention is important and shown that it works and then one is too many and (UNCLEAR – 21:20) suicide is not important but it is, we also try to move towards the (UNCLEAR – 21:25) suicide and I hope that every suicide will

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help us to treasure our life a bit more and hopefully we really can reduce the suicide as many as possible and we all can have a meaningful life and be a blessing to those who need it

KB

That's a fantastic way to round up that interview, thank you so much Paul, I really appreciate the lessons that you have shared with us from Hong Kong and look forward to coming across you around the world in future years as we work on this together

PY

Yeah I think during the COVID-19 it always is a challenging time to everyone, I think COVID-19 we see the quarantine measures, living in social isolation, anxiety and stress but at the same time, I mean the COVID-19 also reminds us that we can all help one another, I think that's important and that is what we want because suicide is everyone's business. Thank you very much

KB

Thank you so much Paul, it's been lovely to talk to you

Ending

If you've enjoyed this episode, we'd love you to subscribe on the usual channels, write a five star review and most importantly share it with your family, friends and colleagues on social media, tagging LivingWorks. This podcast is brought to you by Living Works a network of local suicide first aid trainers in your community and communities around the world. Visit livingworks.net to find out how you can play your part in suicide prevention.

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