PREVENTING YOUTH SUICIDE

By Promoting Life in Online Places

FINAL REPORT

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WITH

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Executive Summary

Youth suicide and suicidal behaviours are complex and pressing problems, with rates of suicide remaining steady or increasing in many parts of the world, despite increased investment in prevention. In some jurisdictions, there has been a recent shift away from a narrow focus on the prevention of risk or death (through risk-factor based approaches or individual, crisis-oriented, behaviour change efforts) to include broader *life promotion* efforts (which are strength-based, holistic, and recognize youth as important contributors to their communities). Given the fact that the scientific evidence remains limited with regard to 'what works' to prevent youth suicide - and this is particularly true when considering online interventions - there is a need to mobilize multiple approaches and consider diverse sources of knowledge to address this complex problem. Life promotion efforts invite possibilities for relating to one another in ways that promote wellness and life overall, and seek to foster conditions that may facilitate these goals. A diverse, interdisciplinary knowledge base is emerging that explores youth suicide not only through the lens of individual risk and protective factors, but also in response to social, political, and cultural realities. These sources shed light on social conditions, as well as the ways young people are creatively engaging with(in) them and with one another in order to sustain themselves and promote life.

Social conditions, of course, also include digital relations and online life – although much more research is needed to better understand how digital relations and places shape the overall lived experiences of youth. In response to the times we are living in now, where much of life is lived online, this project asks the question: "How might some of the social media and digital technologies that young people *already* access, be used to mobilize and extend life-giving connections and contribute to the prevention of youth suicide?" By integrating the learning from a review of approximately 100 scholarly and other sources of literature with the learning from an in-depth youth consultation process as well as an expert think tank this report offers new insights and concrete recommendations for online life promotion and suicide prevention efforts in British Columbia.

When young people go online, they go to different places for different purposes, and make these decisions based on a number of factors. At one end of the spectrum are **places of knowledge gathering**, where youth do not have to share anything at all of themselves. **Places of belonging** can provide a sense of connection and even identity, but come with some potential for **risk, exclusion, and toxicity.** Through lived experience and observation, youth learn to make informed choices when **navigating these online places**, and can come to identify **places of safety**. Oftentimes, when a place feels safe enough and the online environment feels hospitable to them, young people can experience **places of purpose** and derive meaning by not only accessing information but also contributing something of themselves there and offering help to others. Sometimes, this along with other supportive conditions can bring them to experience **places of possibility**: where something new and promising can be generated with others. In places of possibility, suicidal despair may become transformed into something else. At the very least, it may become a place where it is no longer the only option available.

Recommendations for action draw attention to our collective accountability when it comes to the problem of youth suicide and the cultivation of mental wellness. Young people are not asking for more digital content, but a different online culture - one that is hospitable and kind, and designed with youth mental health and well-being in mind. We identify four concrete ways that such a culture shift can be cultivated: a campaign; guidance and role modelling; clear and accessible information; and structural changes in online environments. As in offline places, we are all positioned differently in relation to this

challenge, and we all play different roles when it comes to generating new possibilities together. This report outlines specific strategies that can be taken up by CMHA-BC, young people, web developers, and all of us.

"I'd like to see that community-feel and acceptance for who you are no matter what condition you're in, what you're feeling, and what you're interested in. Having a safe space where you don't have to be afraid of what you're feeling. If we can find ways to embed that into our online spaces the online world will be so much better." – Youth participant

Introduction

The term 'lived experience' is increasingly being used in reference to the kind of expert knowledge that comes via life itself (Billaud, 2012; Ftanou, Skehan, Krysinska, et al, 2017; Goessling, 2017; Roy & Hocevar, 2019; Szlyk, Gubas, & Zayas, 2019; Teman & Saldana, 2019). Particularly in the social sciences, where the complexities of human experience cannot be isolated from one another, the perspectives of those who have personal experiences related to a particular topic of study become a vital source of information (White, 2015).

Today, it is impossible to meaningfully talk about lived experience without including experiences that take place online. For young people, online and offline life are seamlessly interconnected, and digital places can at times offer valuable experiences that may be more difficult to access offline due to stigma or other barriers elsewhere (Cover, 2020; Luxton, June, & Fairall, 2012). For instance, Gibson, et al's (2019) research "highlights the ways that youth use digital communication to resist the silence around suicide in New Zealand" (p. 1026). Sensing the unwillingness or inability of adults to openly discuss suicide without pathologizing them, young people in their study sometimes found the internet a safer place to get information and discuss suicide without being stigmatized.

Many traditional or mainstream suicide prevention efforts narrowly concern themselves with the *avoidance of death* by focusing on the prediction and assessment of risk (Bailey, et al, 2020; Broer, 2020; Cheng, Shum, Ip, et al, 2019; Franco-Martin, Munoz-Sanchez, Sainz-de-Abajo, et al, 2018; Gansner, Belfort, Cook, et al, 2019; Melia, Francis, Hickey, et al, 2020; Rosenbaum Asarnow, & Mehlum, 2019; Torok, Han, Baker, et al, 2020). This in turn, can lead to further regulation and disciplining of individual youth lives (Reeves, 2017; Taylor, 2015) through practices of monitoring, surveillance and calculation of risks. However, there is a growing movement calling for a shift from this death-orientation towards the *promotion of life* and an engagement with the social determinants of mental health (White, 2014; World Health Organization and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2014). That is, there is increased attention being paid to creating the conditions for life to feel meaningful and possible for young people themselves (Wise Practices, 2019).

The current project aims to better understand how suicide prevention and life promotion can meaningfully be taken up online, by hearing from young people themselves about their experiences and perceptions of digital places. The approach recognizes the internet as "one of the places we now live" (Paul, 2019) and follows the lead of research that recommends a democratic approach to suicide prevention (Fitzpatrick, 2020; White, 2014) that engages youth as partners (BC Coroners Service, 2019; Beatfreeks, 2020), recognizes them as critical digital media users already (Gritton, et al, 2017), and understands that at present they are on the front line of digital suicide prevention and life promotion work (Gibson, et al, 2019). It advocates focusing less on promoting help-seeking behaviours (Ftanou, et al, 2018) or even a target audience of perceived "suicidal subjects" (Taylor, 2015) - which primarily locates the onus for change on struggling individuals and does not directly support belonging or alleviate burden. Instead, it would strive to actively resist replicating conditions that marginalize people in the

(digital) world (Broer, 2020), identify and mobilize those conditions that promote life (Cover, 2020; White & Kral, 2014), and work to actively engage all users in the cultivation of safe and hospitable (online) places (Ma, et al, 2016) by generating "places of possibility" together (Goessling, 2017, p. 1).

Through this learning process, which consisted of both reviewing literature and consulting with youth, it became very clear that a central feature of the work of life promotion is the relational process of cultivating hospitable places together – on and offline. Thus, in the material that follows, we outline both our process and our findings, and strive to demonstrate how the two are intricately interwoven as we share our recommendations for the BC Division of the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA-BC).

Approach

In order for the project to unfold in a way that felt supportive to all involved, it was important to consider the scope and scale based on other conditions at play - in particular the relatively short (six-month) timeline we were provided, and the fact that this project took place during the first six months of the COVID-19 pandemic in British Columbia. Working within these parameters, and knowing that recruiting youth to engage with the sensitive topic of suicide (and life promotion) requires a great deal of trust, comfort and safety, we made the decision early on to draw on *pre-existing relationships* as our starting place. It would not have been feasible in such a short timeframe and during the early days of the pandemic to attempt to build new relationships with young people that would be supported enough to ethically carry out this project. Thus, we extended invitations to three young people with whom we had existing relationships, to join our Working Group – and they all agreed. A fourth Working Group member, who worked for CMHA-BC as Youth Program Coordinator for the BounceBack Program, also joined the team which provided another layer of structural support to the project. Specifically, she was able to support participant recruitment for the duration of this project as well as provide continuity after the project is completed.

The Youth Advisory Working Group met monthly on Zoom; communicated weekly via email, text, or phone; and began by developing Terms of Reference to support a relational way of working together. At the heart of this work are guiding principles - collectively developed by the Youth Advisory Working Group - that center:

- The unique wisdom and experiences of those whose lives have been touched by suicide;
- Human connectedness, relationship, and belonging;
- Engagement of young people with a diverse range of lived experiences;
- Knowledge and processes that are valuable and relevant for young people;
- A form of inquiry that is reciprocal, not extractive; and
- Promoting life, and creating (online and offline) worlds worth living in.

With these principles in mind, rather than focusing on recruiting large numbers of youth to participate, an explicit emphasis was placed on depth of learning and on cultivating high-quality experiences for youth who participate. Once approved by the Working Group, engagement and recruitment materials (recruitment strategy, invitations, focus group guide, and survey questions) were further tested by CMHA-BC's Youth Advisory Committee before finalizing, adding one more layer of youth engagement before consultation began.

Consultation with youth who have lived experience related to this topic included: three focus groups (3, 6, and 3 participants), two individual interviews (one of which was with a Working Group member), and three people who completed the survey only - for a total of 17 youth participants. (Eight focus group participants also completed the survey, for a total of 11 completed surveys). Participants were aged 16-28, representing ten communities throughout the province: Vancouver (5), Richmond (2), Victoria (3), Williams Lake (1), Prince George (1), Chilliwack (1), Burnaby (1), Surrey (1), Kelowna (1), and New Westminster (1). They were offered flexibility and choice, provided with gift cards to thank them for their time, and invited to stay connected with the next stages of the project. Nearly all participants opted to stay connected, and requested that they be sent the final report as well as any digital products resulting from this process.

Before finalizing the report, a final engagement took place: this time with CMHA-BC leadership, digital User Experience experts, and academics who work in the field of suicide prevention. A 2.5 hour think tank was facilitated in which nine such professionals engaged with the youth engagement findings, and brought forward specific implications for action as they relate to policy, practice, and design of online places (ie. structural support for youth recommendations).

"I'm really happy CMHA is willing to listen to youth and figure out what works for us. It makes us feel like we're being seen and being looked after. It really helps me, and I hope it will help CMHA too."

A place-making orientation to lived experience online

Learning from youth through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one conversations about how they currently spend time online is an important starting point for CMHA-BC to develop an approach that will meet them where they are. The existing literature also strengthens and supports the insights that were shared with us through this youth consultation process:

There are no uniform experiences of online activity among young people consulted for this project. Some of them found certain apps (like Reddit, Instagram, or Snapchat) to be helpful and welcoming places, while others found aspects of them to be potentially toxic. Research indicates that ninety-four percent of young people living in developed countries use the internet, and one quarter of internet users worldwide are youth (Bailey, et al, 2018). Moreover, "8 in 10 adolescents use some form of SNS [social networking sites]" (Kornbluh, Watling Neal, & Ozer, 2016, p. 267). Our participants described how they use different platforms in different ways. Sometimes they use them to connect with people they know offline, and sometimes to find community among new people from other places. Their own use of online platforms varies depending on what they need – information, community, positive messages. Sometimes they engage actively by contributing content or communicating with others, and sometimes they do not. Thus, the fact that young people's lives no longer occur in any *one* space or place further complicates matters when considering lived experiences of suicidality, wellness, youth suicide prevention, and life promotion efforts (Cover, 2020; Selfridge, 2016; Tao & Jacobs, 2019).

"It's difficult to try to find a single approach. People's reasons for contemplating suicide are different in every case, so the method of life promotion is different in every case as well."

Participants spoke about the complexities of online and offline life influencing one another. They are acutely aware that while a sense of belonging can be experienced online or offline, it never exists solely in one of those places. Luxton, June, and Fairall (2012) note that the internet has become

integral to human communication and organizing, and has impacts yet to be understood. Indeed, research indicates that "youth identity formation using mobile and social media is a synergetic relationship between the individual and the collective online" (Lalonde, Castro, & Pariser, 2016). Selfridge's (2016) research in three BC communities indicates that young people who are street-involved experience enhanced social inclusion through digital technologies, even while they may feel disconnected/excluded from family, school, or other social connections. And the BC Ministry for Mental Health and Addictions (2019) also underscores the importance of addressing the complex social determinants of mental health. So, when engaging in community either offline or online, each of these places may have implications for the other – and this can play out in many different ways. Sometimes the online world is an extension of life offline, sometimes it is a supplement, sometimes it is a provocation for new ways of engaging offline - and sometimes it is a type of antidote.

"Every community I interact with, it's not usually solely online. I'm in the community in every day life, and use the internet to supplement with more content. It's been an extension of the community I've already established."

Through youth consultation, it became clear that young people engage online in different ways, depending on what they perceive is possible and safe for them in a given online place. With different conditions (such as transparency, care, and flexibility), possibilities for living life on their own terms are enhanced. Young people's experiences of digital spaces are varyingly supportive, oppressive, or neutral in relation to expressions of suicidality (Luxton, et al, 2012). Thus, Ma, Zhang, Harris, et al (2016) query how we might collectively cultivate "a more hospitable online world" since "social media is an environment in the making" (p. 1). Through our conversations, youth shared with us some of the conditions that are conducive to life promoting experiences online:

Places of knowledge gathering

Oftentimes, young people use the internet to find information and resources related to mental health and wellness, or other things they are interested in. Youth can find resources, information, shop for goods, and access popular culture (such as music and videos) there (Cover, 2020; Selfridge, 2016). Research also indicates that young people deemed to be at risk of suicide use the internet (including social media) at greater rates than others, and frequently when they are in distress (Bailey, et al, 2018; see also Chan, Li, Law, et al, 2017; Tao & Jacobs, 2019). Youth who participated in this project identified knowledge gathering as a safe entry-point into a new online place, as it doesn't require them to be vulnerable or show up in an exposed way themselves; they can be observers and not necessarily visible when gathering information online. Most participants described what seems to be an in-depth understanding of the online landscape and what platforms, apps, or websites are useful for them for different purposes.

"I enjoy using social media more for information than for connecting with people."

Places of belonging

Cover (2020) discusses how digital communications enable queer youth, for instance, to access other queer youth as well as resources, generating not isolation but "innovative, regular and normative communication and identity production" (p. 5). He highlights some of the monumental ways that possibilities for connectedness has been altered due to digital technologies. Meanwhile, Selfridge's research (2016) clarified how digital technologies are very important for many street-involved youth when it comes to social inclusion – providing access to relationships, resources, information, and popular culture. **Young people find belonging online, but this can look many different ways, and comes in many different places and formats.** Youth who were consulted for our project identified that it can take some trial and error to find the platforms and processes that work for them, depending in part on where they are at in a particular moment in their lives. In some cases, it is about finding a community of people to belong to or feel connected with. In other cases, it is about developing a sense of self, and clarity around one's identity – which helps them belong in the world in general. The impact of finding a sense of belonging can be extremely profound.

"I have OCD and it's hard for me to meet people in in real life that have OCD. But I belong to a couple of Facebook groups for people who have OCD. So you can find things that might be missing in your close circle of friends with complete strangers."

"Sometimes someone famous, like Shawn Mendez shares a post of black, for Black Lives Matter. And then I share a post of Black Lives Matter. And it's like, wow, we live in the same world, Shawn Mendez, we have that connection. We both agree that Black lives matter."

Places of exclusion, toxicity, and risk

While there are many benefits to engaging online, young people are not naïve to the potential risks of doing so. They are constantly considering potential harms, and this brings additional stress and complexity to seeking out community and belonging online. Though there is limited evidence to support it, online activity of young people is often taken up in alarmist ways in the media and literature – with some scholars pointing to a phenomenon of "problematic internet use" (Gansner, Belfort, Cook, et al, 2020, p. 349). For instance, Abi-Jaoude and colleagues (2020) point to the potential harms of smartphone and social media use – linking it to "mental distress, self-injurious behavior, and suicidality"

as well as "social relationships, negative social interactions, including cyberbullying" and "chronic sleep deprivation, and negative effects on cognitive control, academic performance, and socioemotional functioning" (p. e136). Youth who were consulted for this project use the internet in many ways that are useful, enjoyable, and even healing for them. At the same time, they also clearly articulated the potential for exclusion, bullying, toxicity, and other risks to their mental health or wellbeing such as social comparison. Sometimes they find ways to limit or avoid risk online – or avoid the internet entirely for periods of time as a form of self-care. Other times they assess and decide to take a risk because the benefits of engaging are greater. Participants also spoke to ways they strive to not only take care of themselves, but also take responsibility for their own actions online so they don't inadvertently harm others.

"You can really go down that rabbit hole. The deeper you go, the more toxic it becomes. I know a lot of people who can't really get out of it, so they end up on a more negative path than they were on before. So even though they found connection, but they were connecting with the wrong things."

"Social media has a toxic side. If you don't agree with something someone has said, it can become a nasty experience. There's a very us versus them experience, so you can feel like the outsider. It can become unwelcoming when you come across differing opinions, or content you don't agree with."

Learning to navigate online places

Given both the potential benefits and the potential risks of spending time online, young people develop skills to learn how to navigate these places. This takes some experimenting and learning through experience. It also changes for them, depending on what else is going on in their lives: Sometimes more risk is tolerable; sometimes more safety is necessary. Unfortunately, this can mean missing out on important resources or communities, if the risk is too high. Comfort levels also depend on the content they are sharing. Some youth expressed that they are willing to share certain things with a wider/unknown audience, whereas other topics are more comfortable to engage with in smaller, more intimate or controlled online settings. Watching how others show up in certain online places is one way young people learn how they might navigate it themselves. Different apps and different groups of people have different social norms – observation can be a way to learn what these norms are before making the decision to engage. Over time, participants seem to become quite adept at finding their way through this, but it helps when online places are more transparent about what they offer. The research has a great deal to say about potential for risk in online places, as it relates to suicide prevention: Li, Huang, Jiao, et al (2018) note that enhancing "suicide literacy" (i.e. recognizing the warning signs and making referrals to professionals) is important for ensuring the online environment is a safe and responsive one (p. 2). However, Fitzpatrick (2020) critiques the concept of suicide literacy on the basis that it can inadvertently "prevent critical thinking, help maintain professional privilege, and hide complicity with potentially harmful practices" (p. 1). Ferreday (2020) offers that "instead of seeing cyberspace as a space of despair and infection, it might be better to see it as a site of hope: but a hope that is vulnerable to failure" (p. 424).

"It's been a process, but I am thankful. I know that if I'm feeling body dysmorphic or depressed, I will just ignore social media and play games all day. That's the best way for me to avoid spiralling into suicidal tendencies or self harm."

"It's dependent on what I'm sharing. If it's traumatizing – mental illness experiences – I don't mind sharing in a small group or giving vague details in larger groups. But if it's more intimate stuff, then smaller groups of people that I know is better. Dogs or other OK topics, big groups are fine."

Places of safety

There are a number of factors that influence how safe a young person may feel in a particular online place – and these factors are not experienced uniformly among young people. Being anonymous is comforting for some, while knowing who is in the group feels safer for others. Having a large group is intimidating for some, while having a small group feels too exposing for others. Sometimes the internet is used as a means to connect with relationships that also exist offline; other times it is a means to build entirely new networks. In order for young people to make decisions about whether conditions are conducive to safety, it is helpful for them to have options as to how they show up and to have a good understanding of the social norms and expectations of the place before engaging. Youth expressed a desire for more transparency about what to expect when they enter a new online space, so they can make informed decisions about their own comfort and safety. A range of research-based recommendations for internet users (including those who provide professional support through digital platforms) do exist, such as #chatsafe guidelines (Hill, et al, 2019), and protocols for risk mitigation including: strategies for managing cyberbullying, harassment, and privacy concerns; daily moderation of user-generated content, and providing human support in the delivery of online interventions (Rice, Robinson, Bendall, et al, 2016). There are also peer-to-peer recommendations to support young people to know how to respond when they encounter suicide ideations online (Gritton, Rushing, Stephens, et al, 2017).

"It should be in a culturally humble and sensitive way: There's a Facebook group for South Asian women specifically, where it's a safe place, people can share their own experiences with a cultural lens and receive that support."

"I think it's very useful to at times feel unsafe, but it needs to be on your own terms. If you're trying to interact with what you believe to be a safe community, there definitely is something to be said about not being attacked while you're trying to just enjoy yourself on a Friday night."

Places of purpose

Sometimes a real sense of purpose can emerge for young people when online places are safe enough to show up in. Young people's experiences online can then often shift from merely consuming content to participating actively by offering something of themselves as well. What happens in online places can then become so integrated into the person's lived experience that it informs the way they show up in other places as well. Other times, young people are encouraged to find a role for themselves in supporting others they meet (online or offline) who might be struggling. A study by Gibson and Trnka (2020) found that young people were extraordinarily skilled at communicating about sensitive topics, were particularly adept at picking up subtle expressions of distress, had well-developed skills in online emotional literacy, and were "thoughtful, careful, and sensitive" (p. 245) in the ways they engaged in giving and receiving online support. The theme of hope/hopelessness emerges in much of the scholarly research on youth suicide across cultural contexts (Bailey, Rice, Robinson, et al, 2018; Ferreday, 2010; Perry, Werner-Seidler, Calear, et al, 2015; Rosenbaum Asarnow & Mehlum, 2019). However, rather than seeing hopelessness as a characteristic or symptom, a life promotion approach would ask *what conditions* contribute to possibilities for feeling**s** of hope, and actively strive to cultivate those

conditions. In places of purpose, hope can be understood as something we actively create together, as opposed to an individual feeling one possesses.

"We are literally the future generation. We will all be older one day so we will one day be the people in charge I suppose. I certainly felt supported when I wrote my article and was encouraged to share my voice in a safe way."

"The impact of one person sharing their video or sharing their experience can save a life. I've seen that happen a few times already on videos, even on a Facebook post."

Places of possibility

Goessling (2017) conceptualizes 'places of possibility' as literal and metaphorical spaces where people are afforded the tools and resources necessary to imagine alternative realities, identities, and systems. **When young people feel belonging, safety, and purpose, they can begin to think beyond what is, to what may be possible.** Building on "possibility rather than probability" (Goessling, 2017, p. 418), life promotion can involve the transformation of cyberspace through the co-creation of digital places that are hospitable, responsive, and inclusive to young people in all their capacities and diversity. Honouring, not limiting, sovereignty in digital places – as elsewhere - might enhance youth wellness and their connections with life (Reeves, 2017). Participants in this consultation shared the ways being online has supported new possibilities for them – conceptually and practically. They spoke of identity development, healing, community wellness, and social justice. Sometimes the experimental, temporary, and anonymous nature of online places supported this movement towards possibility. Other times it was the intimacy, accountability, and community that was fostered there. Either way, young people indicated how connecting with possibility connected them with their own lives. Participants spoke of the importance of finding ways for each unique person to show up and be accepted as they are. They also spoke of the changes happening now as profoundly collective and political, even though they play out for each of us differently. In this way, life promotion in online places was understood as a collective effort of cultivating an online culture that is caring and responsive to self and others.

"I see social media as a kind of self expansion. As youth we are trying to find our identity. Social media enables us to research and delve into people's lives, and try to learn from them as if they were in front of you. That way, you're able to observe from a distance what someone's life could be, and what parts of that person's life you want to incorporate into your own."

"In terms of life promotion, it's about getting back to basics with children and finding out what are their natural inclinations and what are the things that make them feel alive? What are their interests, what are the things so that life can feel more meaningful and purposeful to them?"

Youth can experience these different types of online places in any order, and/or even simultaneously. As offline, online life is full of complexities, nuances, contradictions and tensions. For example, an online place can be simultaneously a place of belonging and a place of potential risk/toxicity. Teman and Saldana (2019) do an excellent job of pushing back against the norms of academic research and representation with their research into experiences of queer life in Wyoming, including issues of "bullying, suicide, self-expression, self-acceptance, self-harm" and more (p. 43).   They present their 'findings' as story (rather than tidy, decontextualized facts). This invites the reader into the complex relational dynamics at play when life/death, hope/despair intermingle in ways that do not follow an overly simplistic linear trajectory from isolation to empowerment (Cover, 2020).

Recommendations

This focus on cultivating conditions for wellness enables a holistic approach to supporting young people - instead of one that is decontextualized or single issue-based (isolating things like suicide, substance use, poverty, and oppression) (Wise Practices, 2019). Such life promotion efforts can, in fact, have significant impacts in multiple areas of life, given these various challenges may all be precipitated by complex social and political conditions (Barker, Goodman, & DeBeck, 2017; Gone, 2013).

The what

Young people identified a number of ways meaningful life promotion can take place online. What they saw as most valuable was not more content, but the cultivation of a digital environment that is more youth-friendly. There are three specific things youth identified that would be significant changes:

A culture shift

Ultimately, young people have told us the internet is a busy place, and they would like CMHA-BC to take a leading role in supporting a culture shift that makes the online environment more hospitable to young people and more mindful of their mental health. Chan, et al (2017) discuss the need for a more caring online culture to be promoted online, and concerted efforts to bridge the gap between young people and service providers by reducing the physical and psychological barriers to access. Bailey et al's research (2018) explores ways to create an online environment that maximizes the potential while mitigating the risks. And Gibson and Trnka (2020) highlight some of the ways young people are already contributing to such a culture shift online through their informal support of and connections with one another.

"Among all these different spaces, the one thing everyone can benefit from is just having an environment that cares."

Relevant and responsive resources and support

Additionally, youth expressed an interest in having easy access to varying forms of support and community in online places: reliable information and resources, access to timely professional or peer support, moderated dialogue, ways to give back, and even opportunities to come together around things they have in common such as music, art, and identity. Honouring, not limiting, sovereignty in digital places – as elsewhere - might enhance youth wellness and their connections with life (Reeves, 2017). Choice in how or how much they engage is important for young people to feel they have agency in their online worlds. Gibson and Trnka (2020) highlight the ways young people navigate providing support for one another in online places. They do so in ways that are responsive to the subtle cues they receive about what kind of information or support might be useful in a given moment.

"Youth can choose to engage as much as they want, with the knowledge that they can also disengage, safely."

"Largely these tools already exist: There are countless communities with tons of resources, regardless of what you're interested in. So there needs to be a road map that takes them through."

Structural change in online places

Importantly, youth also told us that important life promotion efforts need to take place at a structural level in online places. CMHA-BC can play a leading role in bringing youth mental wellness to the fore for people in decision-making positions so that the user experience will be less risky, toxic, exclusive, and challenging for young people to navigate. Young internet users and their mental wellness should be a consideration in the design of websites, social media platforms, games, apps, and other online places – not only those that are explicitly focused on mental health or suicide prevention. Thus, it is not only youth themselves who could benefit from targeted support, but also everyone who participates in and designs the online and offline places they go. And in this realm, youth are the experts who can inform needed changes. A place-making approach to life promotion in online places would lead away from efforts that center predicting, tracking, and controlling de-contextualized risk (White, 2014) and towards those that center lived experiences of young people as powerful agents in the creative pursuit of collective wellness (Roessling, 2017). Some of the burden young people are bearing might best be addressed by engaging young people in digital worlds not only as potential risks or service-recipients (White, 2014), but as "digital citizens" with important roles to play (Beatfreeks, 2020, p. 14) in imagining and generating as-of-yet not known possibilities (Roessling, 2017).

"Something along those lines that I thought of was creating a resource that people who are developing online games, online spaces can refer to a guide so that they can integrate some features that have been used in the past by other organizations that have worked for life promotion and suicide prevention."

"Ultimately I think it's very important to have life promotion in digital spaces, but in my experience it's more lacking in physical spaces, because you can pretty much access anything online now. I'm glad that CMHA is working on this and I'm hoping that maybe they will be able to bring this campaign into an in-person space as well. I would love to see that."

The how

There are a number of specific strategies offered by young people and supported by literature that could support these efforts:

A campaign

A social media campaign can be one useful tool in creating places of belonging and possibility for youth online by changing the narrative about suicide prevention and life promotion. Youth who were consulted told us it is important that messaging resists the tendency towards perfection with which young people are often confronted online. It is also important that messaging does not individualize or decontextualize suicidality, but instead speaks to the conditions that make life feel possible and hopeful for young people. Messaging should let young people know that they are OK just the way they are, promote acceptance of self and others, and highlight collective responsibility for life promotion. With this in mind, some participants indicated micro-messages that can speak to distinct demographics might help a campaign feel more relatable to young people. The importance of relatability is reflected by the research of Schlichthorst, King, Turnure, et al (2019), who state that everyday people (not celebrities) were preferred as protagonists, and participants appreciated content that was more personal than descriptive. Think tank participants identified three possible approaches that could be simultaneously undertaken when it comes to a digital campaign: 1) educating trolls about how their behaviour impacts young people, 2) educating youth (in general) youth which illustrates the impacts of their online behaviour, and 3) engaging influencers/bloggers/youtubers as role models and advocates for healthy norms and behaviors.

Ftanou, et al's (2018) research involved the development and testing of suicide prevention messages by research participants (including people with lived experience and professionals in the field). When it comes to safety, they learned that tensions exist in that media campaigns may have unintended impacts on *non*-target audiences. In particular, messages crafted for friends and family (about recognizing warning signs) may be painful or feel like blame to friends and family members who have been bereaved by suicide. Other challenges included: finding the difficult balance when it comes to destigmatizing versus normalizing, specific versus generalized language, and general versus target audiences. The authors recommend that rather than focusing on risks, campaigns "should promote alternatives, positive narratives, and help seeking behaviours" (p. 6). If a campaign is related to a particularly sensitive topic, then those who design it need to invest adequate resources in ensuring no harm is done and the message is clear, in order to avoid unintended consequences (Donavan, Jalleh, Fielder, et al, 2009). Importantly, the emphasis on help-seeking promoted in the literature does not reflect what we heard from our participants. Rather, they focused on compassion for self and others and cultivating caring online environments.

"The ones that speak to me personally are important to get the message across. And that speaks on the scale of the campaign and the message. A specific message to specific people. That's the most effective campaign."

"Not everyone is perfect. No one is perfect. Being not OK is OK. That's my statement."

Guidance, role modelling, and transparency about cultural norms

Another strategy put forward in both the literature and in discussions with youth is transparency about the expectations and culture of an online space coupled with competent, compassionate, and

timely moderation when content is user-generated. Modelling kind ways of engaging online – even but not only around sensitive topics – in itself has life promoting implications as it can eliminate some of the toxicity and risk that young people confront when they move about online. Young people expressed a desire to be able to engage with others in reciprocal ways, and this can be easier to do when there are some measures in place to support a positive experience – including respect for all our human diversity. Rice, Robinson, Bendall, et al (2016) offer the following recommendations to mitigate risks when offering digital emental health supports: 1) developing protocols for risk mitigation, including strategies for managing cyberbullying, harassment, and privacy concerns; 2) sharing decision making with a team-based approach to moderation; 3) ensuring moderation occurs at least daily if there is user-generated content; 4) providing human support in the delivery of online interventions; 5) maximizing potential benefits (ie enhancing social connectedness and reducing perceived burdensomeness); 6) targeting otherwise unreachable populations with large-scale online screening tools (but with privacy taken into consideration); 7) intervening immediately when imminent risk is indicated; and 8) creating a safe and supportive environment.

Think tank participants had several ideas for actualizing these visions. Recommendations include: 1) creating an "onboarding" process for members of a community that sets expectations and norms; 2) creating a process for existing communities to deliberately design the norms and behaviors of the community (e.g. conduct World Café-like conversations with a partner as a starting point to communicate and create incentives and disincentives for healthy behavior); 3) partnering with game engines Unreal Engine and Unity to get developer's commitment to safety in games and with developer hubs like Reddit and Github to get a commitment from all web developer communities to safety or provide training; and 4) working with non-toxic platforms/apps for lessons learned that can be replicated.

"Make sure that this space has a place that youth feel safe being themselves in."

"Accessible design, and guidelines for use of explicit language, which should result in mindful action rather than banning users."

"The ability to talk to someone when I need to, everyday mediation help."

Accessible, accurate, and timely information

Young people told us that there is a lot of content out their but it is not always easy to find or navigate. Some suggested a roadmap, others a centralized location, and others some consistency across locations. All of these approaches could help to make the online world less chaotic and more youth friendly, particularly for those who have identified they could benefit from mental health support. eHealth is in its infancy, and much work needs to be done to increase its potential to optimally serve young people. Mushquash, et al (2019) put forward the ten 'e's of eHeath: efficiency, enhancing quality of care, evidence-based, empowerment of users, encouragement of new relationships between patient and health professional, education, enabling information exchange, extending the scope of health care, ethics, and equity. Emental health is one way mental health services can be made more accessible, equitable, and culturally safe (McGrath, et al, 2018; Mushquash et al, 2019). But more needs to be done towards these aims.

Think tank participants highlighted ways websites and apps can *build trust with youth through increased transparency* by: 1) requiring all social media companies operating in Canada to transparently

disclose digital surveillance and publish legible (youth friendly) terms of use agreements with relationship to reporting, risk assessment, and profiling; 2) advising Federal, Provincial, and Territorial government to develop legislation to compel companies to notify and surrender content (high risk content) so that it can be studied in public research; and 3) creating specific design and structure for anonymity.

"There are so many resources out there, but if there's campaign and a place to access it that's a little more formal can be really helpful."

Support for developers to be accountable to the mental health of youth

Both youth participants and scholarly literature point to the importance of structural change to support meaningful and effective life promotion. McCune, Pauly, and VanBoven (2017) describe wellness in collective terms. That is, rather than seeing it as an individual quality (and/or responsibility), individual wellness can be recognized as integrally connected with "the collective whole" including "the impact of broader contextual factors, organizational responses, and practitioner efforts" as well as "the entire family" (p. 10). Thus, from this perspective overcoming adversity is not a primarily individual pursuit: both hardship and wellness are experienced – and can be addressed – in collective terms. Indeed, social and structural inequities impact health and wellness of children, youth, and families – including mental health and suicide (White & Kral, 2014). A recent BC Coroner's Service report (2019) points to some structural changes that increase access in rural and remote communities, and bolster other protective factors (such as family supports, strong peer/online relationships, belongingness, physical health, resilience, autonomy, and a sense of purpose, hope, feeling cared for).

In response to the fact that most young people spend time online, digital technologies are now being explored as a viable avenue by which to increase supports for young people struggling with suicidality (Bailey, et al, 2020; Bailey, et al, 2018). Young people we spoke with pointed to some practical ways developers can create online places that are more mindful of their mental health. A quick exit button can enable youth to experience safety offline when they are exploring online resources or communities related to their mental wellness. Building algorithms into games or other interactive platforms that don't only block suicidal content, but also offer meaningful and supportive responses when they show up would help a lot. Another suggestion was building in an app that enables youth to screen out negative stories and start their day with something that may be less confronting on an emotional level. And even being able to install a mental health-related app on their phone without it being visible on their home screen would help them feel more confident accessing some of the supports that exist, without having to worry about their friends or family knowing.

Just as the disability sector has created widgets that can appear on websites and social media platforms to increase accessibility, the mental health sector could raise a great deal of awareness and contribute to structural online changes by doing something similar. This would not only be a concrete way to support youth in the various places they go online (not only those directly related to mental health or suicide prevention). It would also signal to others our collective responsibility to cultivate online and offline spaces in ways that are more inclusive of them. Think tank participants also recommended *establishing a watchdog function related to online safety and youth mental health* by: 1) partnering with an interested professional body/ institution to issue an annual independent report card or state of the internet report; 2) developing and piloting a healthy community score whereby online communities are assessed for safety as it relates to youth mental health, and 3) petitioning WC3 as the

responsible internet authority that regulates accessibility issues to create "sign post" for youth safety on websites.

"But maybe, if someone types in the word suicide when gaming – although you are censoring that word from the chat, you can send a personal message from the team behind the scenes sending resources. If something like Google can integrate something like resources when you search suicide, then I think definitely games and other platforms can follow suit."

"Usually the negative is the first thing you see. It would be nice for a social media campaign, app, or website to be like a widget that pops the good stuff onto your feed first. Something that makes you pop a little smile."

"A lot of the youth let people borrow their phone. But they wouldn't want the suicide prevention app or severe anxiety app that gives them tools to cope with the day on their home screen. Or they don't want to have to say 'no you can't use my phone, because I don't want you to see what's on there.' So they just won't download it."

The who

Several barriers to accessing youth mental health services have been identified including: wait times, cost, transportation, accessibility, stigma, lack of trust, lack of cultural safety, negative prior experiences, fear of diagnosis, and other barriers can interfere with young people accessing meaningful supports (Bailey, et al, 2020; Bailey, et al 2018; BC Coroners Service, 2019; Chan, et al, 2017; Curtis, et al, 2018; Gibson, et al, 2019; McGrath, Wozney, Rathor, et al, 2017; Melia, et al, 2020; Mushquash, Kowatch, & Toombs, 2019; BC Ministry for Mental Health and Addictions, 2019; Radez, et al, 2019; Tao & Jacobs, 2019; Witt, Spittal, Carter, et al, 2017). In particular, suicidal young people are more likely to turn to informal supports than professional help (Perry, et al, 2015). This means, responding to suicidality and promoting life are responsibilities shared by all of us:

CMHA-BC

CMHA-BC is well-positioned to take a leading role in realizing the vision outlined in this report, having built meaningful connections with both youth and policy makers. CMHA-BC can lead a campaign, as described above, that would contribute to new ways of thinking about collective responsibility when it comes to life promotion and suicide prevention. CMHA-BC can integrate the recommendations of this report into its own website, social media sites, and other online and offline resources. And finally, CMHA-BC can develop guidelines for other organizations and even web developers to help them do their work in ways that are more responsible to the mental wellness of the young people they serve.

Think tank participants also identified that non-mental health partners could be engaged, by making fresh links between the health of the planet/land, community wellbeing, Indigenous sovereignty, social equity, and individual and family wellbeing. They also noted that CMHA is uniquely positioned to play an advocacy role at a political/government level by: 1) evaluating existing crisis response sites and phone lines (under the direction of youth with lived experience) and consolidating existing online resources into a space where you can "Ask Once, and Get Help Fast"; 2) Redirecting new funding to existing life promotion spaces like #wematter to extend their philosophy, brand, approach to other social media sites; 3) working with the Ministry of Mental Health and Addictions and other service agencies to move beyond listing resources without the critical contextual information about their availability and fit for young people; and 4) re-thinking *Bell Let's Talk* to focus on social determinants of

mental health as fundamental to creating conditions for living well and engage youth in the campaign's redevelopment.

"I'm grateful for this opportunity to talk and express my feelings about social media and mental health. This moment is very important for growth: both for people and for organizations. It's important to have these kind of talks."

Young people

When approaching suicide prevention in this way it can be important not to generalize, but instead to inquire into the diverse ways suicide shows up as a possibility in the lives of young people. This project has been a rich opportunity to gain new insights and think differently about what is possible, because of the central commitment to engaging youth at every step. The young people who participated made it clear that for meaningful and lasting change to take place that is responsive to their needs - and also to the expertise they have to offer - it is vital that they continue to be recognized as central players in cultivating new online worlds. They would like ongoing opportunities to give anonymous feedback about their experiences of online places and resources, to contribute their knowledge to the development of new initiatives, and to share stories with each other in a way that contributes to community building online. Traditionally, suicide prevention has primarily treated youth as potential risks, but this process has highlighted they are in fact leaders in relation to this work.

"It was really great to hear what everyone had to say. I know CMHA loves to get our feedback and it's super awesome. Going forward, it would be helpful to get feedback on any first stages would be really beneficial."

Developers of online platforms

A socially just response to high rates of suicide among young people recognizes the structural and social conditions that can drive youth into suicidal despair. Thus, the responsibility for addressing youth suicide rests in part with those of us who are in decision-making positions that can improve the material conditions of their lives. A review by Vusio, Thompson, Birchwood, et al (2019) notes that when considering the impact of community-based alternatives to in-patient mental health services both patients and parents expressed the importance of clarity, choice, lack of judgement, being listened to and cared for, clear lines of communication, and flexibility. When it comes to online places, developers of games, websites, and other platforms play a vital role in constructing conditions that are hospitable, kind, and responsive to youth and their mental health. Thus, actively engaging them in this conversation, and providing them with concrete guidelines and tools grounded in life promotion research is an important next step. In addition to the recommendations that appear throughout this report, think tank participants also recommended engaging technology partners in ethical Algorithmic interventions by: 1) developing a human-powered chat in Google (not just 1-800) geo-localized (could be peer to peer); identifying user pathways through which young people are guided toward safer places in relation to suicide through search engine results; and 3) accelerating verification and influencer status for life promoting individuals by manually verifying top doctors.

"A campaign can be helpful in integrating life promotion into web design – instead of it just being something that is an accessory to the online environment."

All of us

As with any other social environment, cultural norms develop and play a role in our experiences of a place. The recent report from the BC Ministry for Mental Health and Addiction (2019) states that, "mental health, even more so than physical health, is deeply influenced by our relationships with our friends, family and coworkers, and with our general environment" (p. 2) and it is "tied to our general social, economic and physical well-being" (p. 3). As "digital citizens" (Beatfreeks, 2020, p. 14), we all have a role to play in infusing online places with kindness, care, and compassion. Having explicit conversations about this shared responsibility and the impact it has on youth mental health and life promotion can invite people who may not have previously considered these things to think more deeply about their online presence.

"One of the important things about online spaces is that sometimes it can feel impersonal and robotic. So having that human touch, and making sure we can inject empathy and compassion."

Conclusion

There is a growing body of qualitative research that contributes to a nuanced understanding of youth suicide, and enables it to be understood as a social, cultural, and political act that occurs *differently* in different places, in different moments in history, and among different groups of people. Current approaches have not led to decreased rates of youth suicide, which invites new ways of thinking about and relating with this issue. Responding to youth suicide in context invites a relational way of engaging that centers young people as important knowledge-holders and agents in life promotion efforts. This also shifts the way we might approach suicide prevention in digital spaces.

Engaging young people in project design contributed immensely to the quality and relevance of both the process and content of this inquiry. It supported the development of respectful ways of inviting participants, and the development of questions that were clear and elicited responses that provide CMHA-BC with valuable insights into young people's experiences of online places as they relate to life promotion and suicide prevention. Most importantly, we learned about their experiences of online places as well as their specific suggestions to CMHA-BC in order to really make a difference when it comes to life promotion and suicide prevention. Lived experience takes place online and offline in ways that are not distinct. Youth are adept at supporting their own mental wellness and each other in the ways they navigate online places. However, young people had suggestions as to how this burden might be alleviated with support from CMHA-BC, web developers, and all of us. The concrete recommendations in this report will contribute to a more hospital online world, which in turn will help to make life feel more livable for young people.

"If the purpose of this campaign is about suicide, then offering a sense of belonging is important."

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