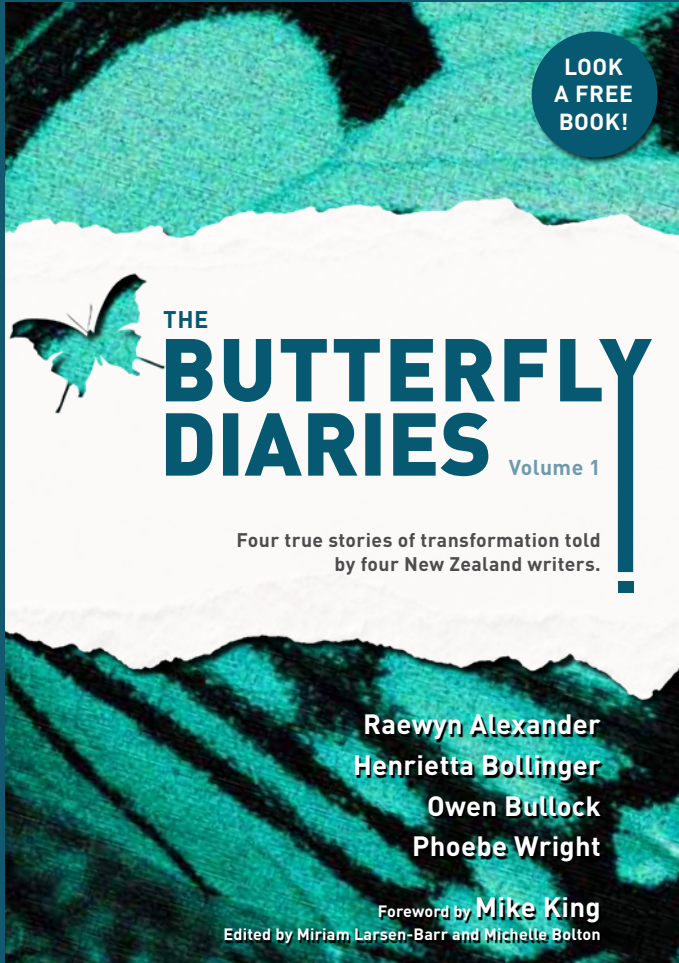


Supporting Someone who is Suicidal

An e-Resource from The Butterfly Diaries Vol. 1



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www.engagenz.co.nz



The Butterfly Diaries shares four true stories of recovery from the experience of being suicidal as told by four creative writers.

This resource collects together a summary of the storytellers' tips for supporters.

In Aotearoa, New Zealand, 1 in 6 people have suicidal thoughts each year. The Butterfly Diaries gives voice to the stories of those who have been there and made it out alive. It is a normal human response to feel hopeless sometimes. It takes a great deal of distress tolerance, brute determination, skill development, support and understanding to survive the urge to act on those thoughts and feelings when they arise. But hardly anyone ever talks about suicidal thoughts and feelings, making it even harder for people to find out how to get through. Sean, Jane, Mary and Brad have all been suicidal, survived their own suicide attempts and found their way to a place where they are glad to be living their lives. In The Butterfly Diaries they share how they strengthened their wings and learned to fly.

“The absolute falsehood inflicted on people who feel broken is that they can never recover. However we certainly can and do...”

~ Raewyn Alexander, Emerging from the Past, Transformed: Mary's Story



The Butterfly Diaries is an Engage Aotearoa initiative to make recovery stories easier to find.

www.engage.nz

STORYTELLER TIPS FOR SUPPORTERS



The people who shared their stories in *The Butterfly Diaries* were all asked ‘What would have helped make your journey easier?’ and ‘What do supporters need to understand?’ There were a range of different answers to these questions, which are summed up by the points below.

- 1. Name your concern and ask about suicide directly:** It’s hard to find the right moment to mention feeling suicidal, it’s always going to bring the party down. Asking about us about it helps us around that barrier. But choose a private moment and give it a little lead in, so we can trust you are coming from a good place. It’s a hard subject to bring up when you’re in it, so being asked about it sensitively makes it that bit easier to talk about it.
- 2. Try not to freak out, just be there:** There’s a long way between having a thought and acting on it. If we are there with you, we are safe for the moment. Breathe and be there. All you really need to do is listen with understanding and empathy. You don’t need to have any answers, just be there, listen and let us know you can relate to what we are going through.
- 3. Name your desire to help keep us alive:** It can really help to hear someone say “I want to make sure you stay alive and make it through this.” If we have started getting our method ready, talk to us about getting rid of anything that might make it easy for us to act on our feelings by giving stored items to you, throwing them away or limiting our contact with risky situations.
- 4. Let us know you would be affected if we took our own life:** Don’t give us a guilt trip, but don’t let us leave thinking it doesn’t matter to you whether we are around or not either. This is a mind-trick our suicidal urges are already playing on us, so you might need to be quite direct to get your message across. Make it harder for us to believe the world would be better off without us in it.
- 5. Recognise we are responding to something:** When we are in a lot of pain it can be really hard to hear people saying ‘stick with it’ and ‘you’ll get through this’, because once we are suicidal we are already sick of ‘sticking with it’ and ‘just getting through’; we don’t want to get through if it is going to mean more of the same. We are suicidal for a reason; you can help by recognising some of those reasons and helping us see that things will change.

6. Ask us what we need: If you don't understand how we could be feeling and thinking this way, ask us what we need or want to be different. If we don't know, maybe what we need is some help to work that out.

7. Help us solve problems, find information, do fun stuff and access support: There are so many support services, therapies and resources out there to help us solve problems, change our experiences and connect with a life we feel is worth living. Sometimes we need a friend or family member to link us in with the help we need and support us through our first visits. Above all we need your help to maintain our connections. Connection is one of the main things that gets people through.

8. Let us know you are available to talk: Remember that suicidal urges don't follow a neat 9-to-5 schedule and support might be needed at inconvenient times. Let us know if you are willing to be one of the people we can call at two in the morning if we really need it. Let us know if there are times you aren't available too, we don't want to overload you. Not wanting to overload people can stop us from asking for help sometimes.

9. Get support for yourself but respect our privacy too: It can be draining to support someone through such a dark time. You need support too, but be careful who you talk to about what someone else has shared. Suicidal feelings are a private matter between close friends, family and trusted professionals. If you aren't sure whether it is okay to talk to a certain person about your support experience or not, ask first or leave out all the information that could identify us. Keep in mind no one wants to hear people talking about their experiences in an off-hand way. Most towns in New Zealand have a Supporting Families in Mental Illness service where you might find some good support. Check them out at www.supportingfamiliesnz.org.nz. The SPINZ website has a video about how to support someone who is suicidal that you might also find helpful. Watch the video online at www.spinz.org.nz/page/152-learn-about-suicide-prevention+caring-for-someone-suicidal.

10. Get help on our behalf if you are really worried: If things are really severe, we might not be willing to listen to good advice from people who care about us nor take action to keep ourselves safe. If it comes down to a choice between respecting someone's privacy and keeping them alive, always choose life. This is hard because you might need to go against our wishes to get us safe by calling a family member, the Crisis Team or an Ambulance on our behalf or coming around to visit even though we have said we want to be alone. We might

be angry with you for a while, but one day we will be truly grateful that you stepped in when you did. If you think we may be about to act on suicidal urges, call the Crisis Team. If you suspect we are underway with an attempt, call an Ambulance or the Police, if weapons are involved. If you can, try to stay with us until the Crisis Team or ambulance arrives and stay with us when they do. This is a scary time and it helps to have support. The Crisis Team will only come if you tell them enough information to let them know there is a serious risk. The Crisis Team is really busy and under-staffed, so they have to prioritise people according to their level of risk. You can help them understand the true level of risk. Let them know if their suggestions are not realistic for your situation or are outside of your capacity to manage and resist the urge to downplay or dismiss your concerns.

SOME THINGS AREN'T SO HELPFUL



Storytellers shared a range of comments that spoke to some things that were better avoided. These are summed up by the points below. Storytellers all recognised it was hard to be close to someone who was feeling suicidal or making suicide attempts and very easy for supporters to fall into doing things that weren't so helpful. We all affect each other in unknown ways and we all make mistakes in our relationships without knowing what the consequences might be. So there is no need for self-blame and guilt when a mistake is made, even though we may deeply regret it. Supporters need compassion and kindness to cope with suicide, from themselves as well as from others. If you are supporting someone who is suicidal or have lost someone to suicide and are struggling in the aftermath, you might find a counsellor, psychologist or psychotherapist a helpful way of processing what has happened and supporting yourself through.

1. Don't dismiss us or delay linking us in with help: If we say we feel suicidal and we need help, please take us seriously, even if we look like we have everything together and wouldn't possibly act on our thoughts. It is likely we will be putting on the bravest face we can muster so we don't freak you out when we talk about it. Try not to take our brave face as a sign that we don't mean what we are saying.

2. Don't respond with anger: We are so stuck it is hard to think of anything but the bad stuff. We don't mean to make it hard for you or hurt you; we might think you are better off without us. Responding to us with anger feeds that idea.

3. Don't tell us we are being selfish or weak: This is likely to be just what we are already telling ourselves. These kinds of thoughts are probably part of why we feel the way we do. It is distressing to hear people say exactly what we fear to be true. Instead, remind us of our strengths, connections and resources.

4. Don't call us 'attention seekers' for talking about it: Seeking attention so we can get help and support is exactly what we need to do. It takes courage, trust and vulnerability to say we are feeling suicidal. If we can't say it, we might act out how we feel instead. This is hard for those around us, but being labelled doesn't make it easier to find the words we need either. We need to be taken seriously and encouraged to talk about it as often as we need to. If we are able to talk about it without being labelled, you will be able to help us. If we aren't able to talk about it without being labelled, we won't talk and you won't be able to help.

5. Don't call us 'attention seekers' if we make an attempt that does not work: If there is part of us that is still not 100% committed to taking our lives, that part of us deserves to be congratulated and strengthened, not humiliated and belittled. If we didn't think the attempt through logically and tried something unlikely to work, we don't need any encouragement to ramp up our efforts next time. An uncompleted attempt in no way negates the pain that led to the attempt in the first place. That pain is still very real and needs to be addressed. A previous suicide attempt places us at increased risk of making a completed suicide attempt in the future. If someone makes a suicide attempt, they need some kind of treatment. Focus your energy on making sure we get it.

6. Don't be cruel to be kind: If we are suicidal, we aren't thinking straight so being cruel to be kind is likely to backfire horribly, not snap us out of it. We have likely stopped being able to talk ourselves out of negative thoughts and your comments may be taken at face value. Distancing yourself from us or cutting yourself out of our lives doesn't teach us anything helpful or give us anything we can use to pull ourselves through. It is useful to set boundaries around what you are willing to put up with or name how hard you are finding it to support us. But make sure your overall message is one of compassion and kindness.

7. Don't think it's going to be simple: Suicidal urges are caused by a combination of thoughts, beliefs, emotions, physical responses, behaviours and situations. No one single factor or incident can really be held entirely accountable on its own. This means recovering from the experience of being suicidal involves a mix of factors and different strategies that take time to be discovered and to work their combined magic. We will likely need you more than once. Please don't give up on us. We will get there if you stay walking with us.



THOSE WHO HAVE MADE IT THROUGH GIVE THANKS TO...

The people who found us and got us to hospital alive
The advocate who made sure we got the treatment we needed
The doctor who stopped and asked us how we were really doing
The funding streams that made treatment available
The counsellors, psychologists and psychotherapists who guided us back
The therapist who wanted to let us sit in the waiting room all day just to keep us safe
The doctors, nurses and social workers who checked in the next day and next week
The support workers who helped us navigate the system and stay on track
The peer support workers who stood beside us and shared what they had learned
The compassionate, understanding ones at work, at school, at university
The family, who loved us, visited, called, gave us safe places and stayed involved
The partners who stuck by us and saw the good in us when we couldn't see it
The friends, who dropped round, came with us, texted back and kept including us
The people who made different kinds of information available
The strangers with like minds who welcomed us in
The chances to connect with the things that give life meaning
The unexpected twists of fate that gave us the inspiration we needed
The people who continue to walk with us
The memories we have been part of since
The things we have been able to give
And time.

SUPPORT SERVICES | RATONGA TAUTOKO



If the issues raised in this book get you thinking about yourself or someone you know, please reach out for support. You may find the support you need at the other end of one of these help lines.

CASPER

Free phone: 0508 CASPER or 0508 227 737

Lifeline

Free phone: 0800 543 345

Outline

Free phone: 0800 OUTLINE or 0800 688 5463

Tautoko Suicide Helpline

Free phone: 0508 TAUTOKO or 0508 828 865

Youthline

Free phone: 0800376633

Free text: 234

Your Local Crisis Team

Every community in New Zealand has a Crisis Team who are available to respond to people in a mental-health crisis. If you or someone you know is at risk of hurting themselves, call your local Crisis Team.

Emergency Services

If you or someone you know is underway with a suicide attempt, call 111 and ask for the Ambulance, or if weapons are involved, ask for the police. Keep in mind that in mental-health situations, the police are there to keep the person safe, not investigate them for anything. You can even call 111 from a cell phone that has no credit on it.

There are a range of services available in your community that can provide ongoing support.

Your Local GP

Your local GP doctor can refer you to the help you need if you tell them what you are going through. They can link you in with psychiatrists, psychologists, counsellors, support workers and the funded options.

The Community Resources Directory



Find contact details for all the different forms of help, support and connection you might need, including how to find your local Crisis Team, and how to access free therapy, in The Community Resources Directory on the Engage Aotearoa website.

www.engagenz.co.nz

The Coping Kete



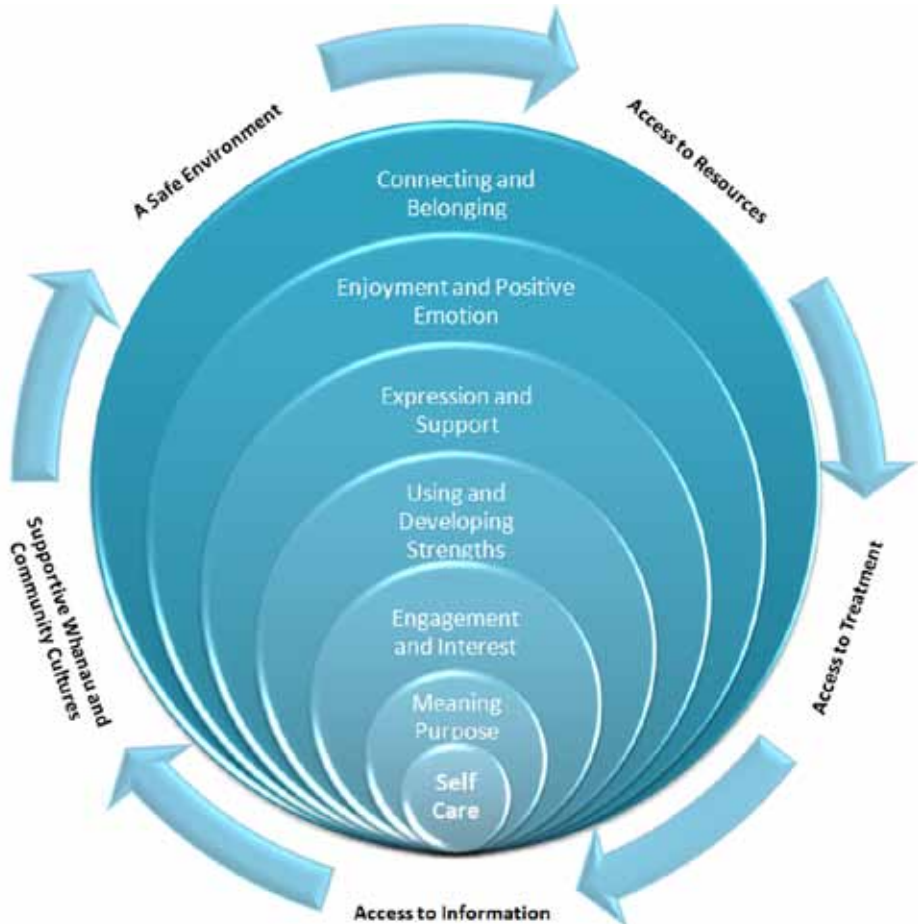
Find over 100 different strategies for coping with distress and improving the moment in The Coping Kete on the Engage Aotearoa website.

The Coping Kit Smartphone App is coming soon. Receive updates from The Coping Kete to your phone, search the archive, build a 'Test Kit', schedule practice-point reminders and save your favourites to your 'Personal Coping Kit'. Use the 'Coping Shortcut Button' to instantly display a random favourite in moments of stress and distress.

www.engagenz.co.nz/copingkete



THE ENGAGE MODEL OF MENTAL-HEALTH PROMOTION



When researchers looked for what defines the experience of a meaningfully happy life, they found seven core symptoms of what they termed ‘Flourishing’. People who were meaningfully happy still experienced stress and distress but they also experienced meaning/purpose, enjoyment, interest/engagement, a positive self-view, optimism, resilience and positive relationships. These ‘symptoms’ do not come from no where. The Engage Model breaks them down into the practices that create them and the environments that support them. For example, a sense of meaning and purpose doesn’t just happen, it is something we make by doing meaningful things; enjoyment comes from doing things that are enjoyable and having access to the options we need; a positive self-view comes from the act of caring for ourselves, from using our strengths and from being cared for. We all need to do certain practices and connect with certain environments to experience the symptoms of mental wellbeing. The free resources at www.engagenz.co.nz are designed to help you find what you need to connect with these things and build a life you feel is worth living.