



Transcript



In The First Person: Suicidality and Bereavement

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Host (00:01):

MHPN advises that the following episode of In the First Person features a conversation about the lived experience of suicide that may be distressing to some listeners.

(00:10):

Hi there. Welcome to Mental Health Professionals' Network podcast series. MHPN's aim is to promote and celebrate interdisciplinary, collaborative mental health care.

India Guerrieri (00:28):

Welcome to this episode of MHPN Presents: In the First Person, a podcast series that provides you with the privilege of hearing people's stories in their own words. My name is India Guerrieri, and I'm joined today by Julie Rickard. Welcome, Julie.

Julie Rickard (00:43):

Hi, Indi. It's great to be here.

India Guerrieri (00:45):

Julie, I have been looking forward to our chat today. You and I know each other quite well. We have worked together for over a year now, I'd like to say, both as lived experience practitioners, and today we're really going to be sharing our respective experiences of suicide. Your story of lived experience of suicide bereavement, and mine as a survivor of a suicide attempt. We regularly chat together about our experiences, and each time I take home something new. I'm anticipating that today's conversation will not be any different. Julie, we said before that you're bereaved by suicide. I'd love to hear about your partner, Steve, who you lost. What was he like?

Julie Rickard (01:26):

Steve was, and I will absolutely sound like a cliche here, Steve was the love of my life. I literally knew the night I met him that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. He was funny, he loved animals and he just treated me like a goddess. All I could imagine was us growing old together, but unfortunately that wasn't to be.

India Guerrieri (01:53):

Again, as I always say, I'm so sorry for that loss. How long ago was it that he passed?

Julie Rickard (01:59):

It was 12 years ago now, and it's so funny how, in suicide bereavement, time takes on this sort of fluid character. On one hand it feels like a lifetime ago, and on the other hand, I can close my eyes and it feels like yesterday. I'm wondering, with your experiences as a survivor of suicide attempts, do you have that same fluid relationship with time as well?

India Guerrieri (02:26):

A hundred percent, especially because my suicide attempt came after a really traumatic time in my life. I'm an intimate partner abuse survivor. Yeah, so it really kind of comes and goes. Some days it feels a lot closer to home, and other days it feels like that distant friend that you know really well, but you just haven't seen in a while. But yeah, that time flow, it's a hard one really.

Julie Rickard (02:58):

And that's really interesting because, I know for suicide bereavement, it's a really complex form of bereavement. There's a lot of really conflicting emotions that come up as part of suicide bereavement that nobody talks about. You hear about the anger, and the questions, and the guilt, and all those things, but one thing I'd just like to highlight today is, for some people, there's a real sense of relief. And it almost feels disloyal to say that you are relieved that somebody has suicided. But when you've gone through a period of real chaos, and never knowing what you're going to come home to each night, all of a sudden there's a sense of calm. But that sense of relief is so tinged with guilt. There is so much guilt around suicide on both sides of the coin, as me, as someone bereaved, and I'm sure, do you feel guilt as part of your experience as well?

India Guerrieri (03:56):

Definitely. Definitely after it happened, after I started feeling quite suicidal and after a friend came over to help me during that suicidal crisis, I felt so much guilt. I felt that I shouldn't have put that on people. I shouldn't have put it on my loved ones that I wasn't doing well, and it wasn't their responsibility to make me feel better. And that guilt took a really long time to get past as well as the guilt of, I think it's shame as well. It's shame. That's where that guilt really comes from. That shame of going, oh God, was I attention seeking? Was I just too weak for what I was going through? Maybe it was selfish that I felt this way. And then, on the same token, you've got that feeling of, but I can't do this anymore. I can't keep going anymore, and waking up every day and reliving this same terrible experience over and over and over again, and suicide is the only way out that I could imagine at the time.

Julie Rickard (05:07):

It still amazes me, having worked with you for a year and learning so much from your perspective, it's really helped make, as I say, it makes sense out of the nonsensical situation that I was in. But I'm always astounded at the similar experiences on either side of the coin. It's amazing when we talk, and we talk often about our experiences, it's quite a unique job that we do, that we do talk about our own lived experience of suicide every day, and it's really helped me answer a lot of the questions. I cannot only imagine what Steve was going through in those final days and weeks before his suicide, but talking to you has really eased a lot of my discomfort around that, and I really appreciate having that chance to explore that other perspective. So, I'd like to just personally thank you for that.

India Guerrieri (06:03):

No, thank you Julie. I always love having these conversations with you. I'd love to hear more though on what you were saying before, on that discomfort and that questioning. What is that like for you?

Julie Rickard (06:16):

It's a similar experience to what you just spoke about. You go through this enormous event in your life, but it's tinged with suicide. And so, when it happened for me, that my partner suicided, I then had this awkward situation where I had to tell people, and I didn't know what kind of reaction I was going to get. Was that a reflection on me as his partner? Was it a reflection on our relationship, that he'd suicided? So, I felt a lot of shame about that, and how I was going to tell people but still honour his life. He was much more than that one final decision. We had 15 years together, and I wanted to honour him as a person, but still tell the facts. And it was very early on that I decided I was going to be very open about telling people that Steve did suicide, and I wanted that to be, not confrontational, but I wanted people to actually hear that word and actually have a little bit of self-reflection on themselves about how it made them feel. And so, it was really early on that I started really feeling like I needed to do more in that suicide prevention space. It was a real fire in my belly, because I'd felt that shame and I'd felt that guilt, and I didn't want other people to feel that. So, that's what really pushed me forwards and helped me through my grief. It's that real meaning and purpose.

India Guerrieri (07:51):

That meaning and purpose can really be a lifesaver, I think. During my suicide attempt, I felt as though I had no meaning and purpose, or a sense of connection to anything in my life. As I said, I'd been with a

partner who abused me, and when I came out of that relationship I really felt as though I had nothing. I'd lost my sense of identity. I'd lost a lot of friends during that time, as well. Honestly, I felt like I lost myself and that a part of me had died already. And I think that's what made the idea of suicide a lot easier for me to comprehend and say that that was what I wanted to do, and how I would escape the situation, because I already felt dead inside. I already felt as though a part of me had been taken away and it was just a shell kind of left, and suicide kind of felt like that warm friend that was there going, this is an option and I'm here.

Julie Rickard (08:56):

Thank you for sharing that. That's a really beautiful way of expressing it. And I wish more people could talk openly about their experiences like that. As I said before, it's really helped me sort of process my partner's suicide, by hearing these perspectives. And I think it's really important that we hear these voices so that we can at least see these perspectives. That isolation that you speak of, it's such a common theme across the whole life cycle of suicide, that isolation that leads up to the suicide. And on the other side of the fence, the isolation I felt being bereaved by suicide, feeling like the only person in the world going through it. And I was 38 at the time, none of my friends had had to deal with the death of a partner. I was the first in my peer group. I was the first person in my extended family that had experienced a suicide, and I really felt like I was the only person in the world going through that.

(09:58):

And this is where I'd really like to bring up the importance of postvention and suicide-specific bereavement support. I was really fortunate that I had excellent suicide-specific one-on-one bereavement counselling that really helped me tackle it from that lens of suicide. It's so different from other bereavement, and I can't emphasise that enough. It's so complex. So, I was really fortunate to have that support. And the other thing that a lot of people don't realise is there's no timeframe on grief. And the service that I accessed was amazing. They didn't put a timeframe on grief. It was as long as you needed that service. I think that's really important. And I also think there's a lot of power in support groups. I now facilitate a postvention suicide bereavement support group, and I remember when I first attended a support group myself, and there was this one lady there facilitating and she was about 10 years down the track. And I looked at her and I went, I want to be like her. And she so inspired me, and now I'm running my own group, and I've had members of the group express their gratitude to me and it's like, oh, I'm so grateful for that lady that supported me. And now I have the skills and the strength to do that for other people.

India Guerrieri (11:29):

And I know out of that support group as well, you've now got people creating their own bereavement support groups, as they feel, as you've helped them so much that they want to do, they want to give back the same way, which I think is such a testament to your strength, and the way you use such a terrible time. Because it's not a fair thing, suicide. It's not fair to the person who dies by suicide. And it's certainly not fair to the people that have been left behind, and who try to make sense of the suicide, because at the end of the day, the answers we're looking for from a suicide, that person who can answer it is no longer here with us. So, I think it's a real testament to you, that you have inspired people to create their own support groups after.

Julie Rickard (12:21):

Oh, thanks Indi. I was actually reading not that long ago that they estimate that for every suicide, 135 people are directly impacted by it. So, that's a lot of people out there in Australia walking around with this pain inside them. That could be anything from the emergency services that attend, family, friends, workmates, colleagues, sports teams, schoolmates. When you look at it like that, it's a huge impact on society, and not having an outlet to be able to speak about it, I don't think I would be in the position I am today if I hadn't found that one-on-one bereavement support and those groups. It's a really important to have that safe space to be able to say the things that you can't say anywhere else.

India Guerrieri (13:10):

And with people that really understand what you went through, because anyone that loses a partner, it's terribly difficult, and then you add on it's suicide, that has so much negative perceptions about it, it makes it all the more harder. I'd love to ask though, going back to Steve, was there any, now that you look back, any warning signs you really see?

Julie Rickard (13:40):

That's a great question. And we say hindsight's 20/20, and I wish I knew then what I know now. One of the things that sticks out really clearly to me in the sort of the days leading up to his suicide, he was quite combative and argumentative, and it was a really rocky time. And then, I'll never forget, on the morning that he actually died, I didn't know at the time, he was incredibly calm and really compliant. We had a doctor's appointment booked for that afternoon and he was, yep, I'll go to the doctor. He had a shower, he was like, and I thought, oh, we've turned a corner. The worst is over. How good is this? I can relax. But I now know that that is a really big warning sign, that if those big changes in behaviour, particularly if somebody has been quite distressed and they become calm, that can be a real indicator that somebody's made the decision and they're feeling calm because the pain is going to end. And it's really common for people to interpret that exactly as I did, that we've turned a corner. How good is this?

India Guerrieri (14:54):

This is a good sign. Things might be picking up now, when in reality it can be a completely opposite reaction. I know for myself, that feeling of calm, I hid my suicidality for a really long time from all my friends and family. A lot of people just did not know I was suicidal. But I had one friend who really looked out for me during that time, and I remember she came over to this house, and I was house sitting at the time, and we sat down on a bed together and at that moment I'd really come to terms, I was like, yep, I'm going to die by suicide. This is it. I've made up my mind and I don't have to worry about this anymore. And she came over, and we sat down together on the bed and she was like, Indi, look, you seem fine. You seem a bit erratic, but you seem fine and you've just come out of an abusive relationship and I don't think you should be fine. Are you thinking about suicide? Is everything okay? And that's where that calm stopped. Because instead, I felt as though all this emotion just washed over me in one go. And at the same time, that all this weight had just been lifted off my shoulders too, I felt that, oh, I can speak about this freely with someone, and someone really is ready to listen to what I have to say.

Julie Rickard (16:30):

That's such a powerful story. And what an amazing friend that, potentially, risked coping some anger and some fury from you, but was prepared to go there. And how is your friendship now?

India Guerrieri (16:44):

Oh, amazing. She's been one of my best friends for years, so I wouldn't be the person I am without her. I owe her a lot, yeah.

Julie Rickard (16:54):

It's that connection, isn't it? It really breaks that feeling of being alone, when someone can sit beside you and go where no one else is prepared to go, and be brave enough to ask those questions and to hear the answers as well, more importantly.

India Guerrieri (17:11):

To be ready to hear, no, I'm not okay. I am thinking about suicide. That's a scary thing to hear. And I can't imagine the fear that must've gone over her in that moment, but we really just sat together and she said, I'm sorry, I'm here for you. I can't take this away, and I don't know what to say to you, but I'm here. And that was really all I needed, was just to let someone know this secret that I'd been holding in for so long, and to just sit with someone in that was a really beautiful thing to do. I'd love to know though as well, what were your supports like at that time, your friends and family? What were their, I guess, reactions to Steve's death?

Julie Rickard (18:02):

That was a really mixed bag. I lost friends and I think that's a really common experience. I'm sure you probably went through the same thing with your experiences. It was surprising, support came from the most unlikely of places. The people I thought would really step up didn't, and others who I didn't expect to step up really did. So, that was really lovely. And I also found that the people that really stepped up and were most empathetic were people that had gone through really traumatic events themselves. It almost sharpens your empathy skills, I think.

India Guerrieri (18:40):

I feel like it connects you on such a deeper level, and it doesn't have to be that someone else has been bereaved by suicide, but just anything that's maybe been a struggle in their life, that I feel like they draw on that experience and they go, I know what it's like to feel this isolation and this, to be alone in this, and I don't want you to have to go through that the same way I did, even though they're completely different stories and experiences.

Julie Rickard (19:08):

Yeah, I think that's really the lovely thing about our team of dedicated lived experience workers, that we come from that same place and we're able to really support each other at work as well. And it's interesting, I'd like to ask you, how does it feel talking about those experiences now every day as a dedicated lived experience practitioner?

India Guerrieri (19:32):

I take it day by day. We were talking about this earlier actually, this idea of grief, and remembering our past selves and always holding it with us. And I explained it that, at the start, it's like this person just screaming in front of you constantly, and you're always reminded of all this traumatic stuff that happened in your life, whether, for me it was feeling suicidal and it was the abuse that I'd experienced. It was like this person in front of me just screaming all the time. And then eventually, after a while it just kind of got a bit softer and softer and softer. And that's kind of what it feels like to speak about this every day, is that it's still there and it still hurts sometimes, and that person's still screaming and being like, remember this, but it's not as loud anymore and it's not as consistent. There's still days that it feels really loud and really intense, but I know that when I go to sleep and the next day I wake up that it won't be as loud, and I will be okay. And I think it has taken me a long time to get to that point.

Julie Rickard (20:46):

I think that's really interesting that we both talk a lot about time, and they say that time is a great healer, and it sounds so cliche at the time when people say it to you, but I think it's true.

India Guerrieri (20:59):

I used to hate it when people would tell me that you need to give it time, it gets easier with time. And I'd always go, no, it doesn't though. I've been waiting. It's been a year, it's been two years. Why aren't I better? But it is, one day I think you just wake up and it doesn't hurt as much anymore.

Julie Rickard (21:18):

And we're our own harshest critics as well. I know I put so much pressure on myself to put on this happy face for people, because I knew that such an awful thing had happened to me. When I walked in the room, I almost felt like the grim reaper, I'd just bring the mood right down. And so, I always felt I had to be doubly happy, to make sure that everyone else was okay, and I was so busy making sure that everybody else was okay. And then I'd climb into bed alone at night and that's when I would sort of allow myself those feelings. But there's so much time when you are too busy focusing on making sure that everyone else is okay, and I don't want to bring the room down, and I'll deal with this on my own. And I'm also curious, I've talked a lot about counselling and support groups. What, if any, helped you after your suicide attempt?

India Guerrieri (22:09):

I had a really amazing psych help me throughout what I was going through. I had so much shame for both feeling suicidal and being a survivor of abuse that I was just like, there's so much going on here. And it took me a while to find this psych. I went to a couple of free places, a lot of places for victim survivors, Headspace, things like that. And then I landed on this one clinician, and she was really amazing at holding everything that had happened before. And I often say to her, I go, there are days that I still feel suicidal, and I know that I wouldn't go through with it anymore. And I think she holds that

really well and really beautifully, that I've never seen before, because I think a lot of people think that you can't live a good life and still sometimes have a overwhelming sense of suicide.

(23:16):

That these can be held together, you can have a good life and feel happy, and also sometimes have fleeting thoughts of suicide. And I think she was the first person that really allowed me to be okay with that feeling. Because again, I felt so much shame with that feeling over and over again. So, having someone go, it's okay to hold both, to want to live and to continue on and have this happy life, and also have days that you feel suicidal. I think that was the biggest help for me. Just acknowledging that experience, and saying it's okay to feel this way, is a massive thing.

Julie Rickard (23:57):

And I think it's really important to find professional supports that you have that good rapport with, and not just go with someone because that's who was allocated to you or that's who was available. If it's not working for you, to call it and go, it's not working, and keep trying until you find somebody who really helps and not harms. There's a lot of harming that can go on in the seeking of help. So, the trial and error was, again, it's one of these things, both sides of the coin, we both went through the same thing. There's so many similarities.

India Guerrieri (24:32):

I'd love to know how your experience of finding help, or reaching out and finding those support groups were for you.

Julie Rickard (24:39):

My bereavement experience was 12 years ago, and I believe the systems have changed a bit now, but there was this real onus on me. I got the information from the coroner, but it was, the onus was on me to seek help. And when you are in this absolutely chaotic state where you are dealing with this unexpected death, and your whole world's turned upside down, and then you're expected to find your own support services, it felt like climbing Mount Everest. And the nearest groups to me, suicide-specific groups, were about a 45-minute drive away. And I remember at the time it was hard enough just to get up and have a shower and get dressed, let alone driving all that way, baring my soul, and then getting in my car, driving home to an empty house, absolutely broken. So, it took a while for me to find the right group for me. I managed to find one closer to home that was much more safe and supportive. But again, it's that real trial and error. But I was surprised at my self-awareness to realise when things weren't working. Did that surprise you as well?

India Guerrieri (25:48):

It definitely did. I felt as though, and again, with the abuse that I had experienced from a past partner, I felt that I couldn't say that I wasn't enjoying something or that this wasn't the right fit. Yet it came really easily in a therapy setting, and in a mental health setting, to put those boundaries up and say, actually, this isn't working for me, and that's okay, and going and finding a new one. But again, that is a struggle

to do when you are in a state of trauma, when you're in a constant state of fight or flight after a bereavement or a suicide attempt, or just living with that suicidal ideation, it's hard to continuously find someone. And I'm sorry that you had to do that all by yourself. It's incredibly difficult.

Julie Rickard (26:38):

Yeah, it's an interesting place. It's a bit of a saying in the bereavement space, it's a club that no one wants to join. And once you find your people, it's incredibly powerful to be able to speak your truth with people that have walked that walk. I'm also curious, after you had a suicide attempt, how did people treat you afterwards?

India Guerrieri (27:04):

I was lucky that I had a lot of friends who supported me and who had gone through similar times within their life, whether that be feeling suicidal or having a suicide attempt. So, I think I was really lucky in that sense, that I had a lot of friends supporting me, but I didn't tell many people either. There were only a couple of people I told, and I think I did that for a very specific purpose, as I didn't want everyone to know, and I didn't know the reactions that I'd get from people. Whether I'd be met with overwhelming sadness by someone, or anger, or judgement. It was scary. And as well, it felt like such a sensitive thing, that I wanted it to myself for a really long time. Now, obviously, I don't mind talking about it, but at the time I was very particular about who I told, and I am happy that I did that because if, I think if I was open the way I was now, I would've ended up with another attempt because people are mean. And as well, when they hear suicide, you get all this stigma coming up, all that prejudice.

Julie Rickard (28:29):

Yeah, it was an interesting experience. I did not have the luxury of keeping it to myself. And I was quite a private person beforehand, and I felt like my personal business was being talked about in kitchens and lounge rooms all across the land. It was such a strange feeling, and probably people weren't talking about it, but I perceived it as being the latest gossip that everyone was talking about, and the conversations you have in your head about, what are people thinking of me, and are they judging me? And it's so isolating.

India Guerrieri (29:06):

And I think it goes right back to that idea that we are our own biggest critics within these moments. And that's the hard part, is that we beat ourselves up so much over a lot of things that are just outside of our control a lot of the time.

Julie Rickard (29:22):

Absolutely. And losing my partner, whenever life was really tough, he was my sounding board. And to have the worst event that could possibly happen in my life, but also lose my sounding board as well, it was like the double whammy. It's just so complex.

India Guerrieri (29:40):

And I know now you have an amazing new partner. I'd love to hear a little bit about him maybe.

Julie Rickard (29:47):

It's really interesting that we talk about these experiences from, for me it was 12 years ago, and I talk about it for a job and I'm really fortunate that actually right now, life is actually really wonderful, and I've got an amazing new partner now. And I remember the night I met him actually, I told him my story, and he had a very traumatic event in his past that he shared with me as well. And again, it's that connection of shared trauma. You have that empathy; you can sort of really relate on a deeper level. And actually, I've got a job that I love. I've got real meaning and purpose in my life. I've got an amazing partner. Life is really good now, and I just want to ask you as well Indi, how is life for you now?

India Guerrieri (30:38):

Life is good. Life is good, I remember a couple of months ago I got asked in a workshop, the question of what would 19-year-old India think about you today? And it really struck me because I said, well, 19-year-old India didn't think she'd be here, or let alone alive and doing something. So, I think it always brings me gratitude, and it always brings me joy each day, that I'm here. That doesn't mean that each day is easy, but I have beautiful friends, family, a partner that I adore, two cats that I love with all my heart, and they bring me a lot of joy, and they help as well. I think that's the main thing. It doesn't take away what happened, doesn't take away that trauma, but it helps when things do get a bit rough that I can turn to all of these beautiful things in my life, this beautiful support system, and I can go, today's not good, and I can fall back on someone.

Julie Rickard (31:52):

I think that's the really unique lens you can have after having such a traumatic event in your life. I think that when you experience those incredibly painful moments, they give you the ability to really appreciate the good times. And I'm grateful, I'm grateful for everything that's happened in my life, it's made me the person I am today. Exactly as you said, that's not to say that there aren't bad days, there are bad days, but now I have the support services, the support networks, the self-care skills that I need to get back up again, and what a journey.

India Guerrieri (32:34):

I feel like it's always weird saying we are grateful for the things that happened, because I'm not grateful for the situation, but I'm grateful for everything that has come out of it. And I feel like it's a very weird thing for some people to hear when you go, actually, I'm grateful for what happened in my life. Do you find that as well?

Julie Rickard (32:55):

100%. It's a privilege to be in that place. That's not to say that we haven't done a hell of a lot of hard work to get there.

India Guerrieri (33:05):

So much. It's been a couple of years, so that definitely helps as well.

Julie Rickard (33:11):

Time is the great healer.

India Guerrieri (33:13):

A hundred percent. 100%. Thank you for chatting with me.

Julie Rickard (33:19):

No, it's a real honour and a privilege. And as I said earlier, having the chance to really have these open and honest discussions about both sides of the story, I think we can gain a lot of understanding from each other. And I love our conversations.

India Guerrieri (33:37):

And I think the more that we have these open and honest conversations about, whether it's thoughts of suicide, bereavement, a suicide attempt, or being a carer of suicide, the more we can normalise it. Because as you said before, for each person that dies by suicide, 135 people are then affected by that. That is a lot of people. So, I think the more we can have these open and honest and candid conversations, I hope that we start to normalise that experience. A terrible experience that I hope no one else goes through, but experience that I know people go through.

Julie Rickard (34:15):

Absolutely. And hopefully, after people have heard us have a conversation, maybe that will give them the courage and the strength to have their conversations with their loved ones as well.

India Guerrieri (34:25):

Well, thank you for joining us on this episode of MHPN Presents: In the First Person. You've been listening to me, Indi.

Julie Rickard (34:33):

And me, Julie.

India Guerrieri (34:34):

If you want to learn more about Julie or myself or the service we work for, our bios and a link to Life Connect can be found on the landing page of this episode, where you'll also find the link to MHPN's feedback survey. MHPN values your feedback, please follow the link and let us know how you found this

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Julie Rickard (35:18):

From me.

India Guerrieri (35:19):

And me.

Host (35:21):

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