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Healing and growth after trauma in a rural community: A model and process of development

This presentation will outline the role taken by a Clinical Social Worker in a rural community both as advocate for new services and specifically in the development of a process to create growth after trauma. Following the death by suicide of a popular 18 year old star footballer and tennis coach, the impact in the local community was so great that the service sector mounted a response. However within 11 weeks, a 13 year old in the same community took his life. A similar event occurred in a community 45 minutes away and questions arose about whether the response had played a part in the second death. These deaths occurred in Mooroopna and Seymour in Northern Victoria, Australia. My consultancy was asked to evaluate the response. Following in-depth interviews with over 100 affected people, a number of recommendations were made. One of them, to provide a process for recovery, was handed back to me. The reason for the recommendation was the evidence of self-harming behaviour in many young people since the suicides. The result was the development of a program I called, "Leading from Within". Based on the concept that growth can come from trauma, a small group trauma recovery, suicide prevention, leadership development program was established. In the first year, there were 17 small groups with almost 100 people of whom the majority were 12–25 years old, the rest were adults. The presentation will follow the development of the program from 1999 to 2017 with the outcomes of a recent evaluation by the University of Melbourne. The model has been validated and offers insight into ways that trauma can be addressed in a rural community. There will be opportunity for participants to discuss ways in which the model could be used in their own communities. In addition, given that I have worked for over 45 years as a clinician in a rural setting, I will underline the opportunities I have had, and that are available for social workers or other clinicians generally, to advocate on behalf of their community for new service development.

Biography

Jennifer O'Connell is a Clinical Social Worker with 45 years' experience, mostly in a rural community. She graduated from Social Work and a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Melbourne. In public organisations she initiated or promoted service development including childcare, parenting, child protection, foster care, residential services, a child and adolescent mental health service. She has worked with the aboriginal community for 45 years. In 2000 she conducted an evaluation of the first service sector response after a youth suicide. The evaluation led to the development of the program Leading from Within. She helped establish a not for profit organisation of the same name to address trauma recovery, focussing on Post Traumatic Growth. She and her husband run small groups for people who have suffered from all forms of trauma, including developmental, generational and specific incidents. Recently evaluated by the University of Melbourne it has been demonstrated that this program works and that once people have completed it they are able to mentor others. This aspect of the program - the Ripple Effect - has a community development aspect to it. Jennifer works in her family business: O'Connell Consultancy and also provides programs for Leading from Within (Greater Shepparton) Incorporated.

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