



CMHA HK FACTSHEET

WORLD SUICIDE PREVENTION DAY 2021 RESOURCE

World Suicide Prevention Day is an initiative of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) and takes place on 10 September each year. The theme for 2021 is **CREATING HOPE THROUGH ACTION** #WSPD2021.

The World Health Organisation reports that more than 700,000 people die by suicide every year, which translates to one person every 40 seconds.

In this resource, we interview The University of Hong Kong's Associate Professor **Dr. Paul Wong** and **Ann Pearce**, a mother who, following the loss of her son in 2017, is leading a number of campaigns to raise awareness of and prevent youth suicide. We also include information from **Mind HK** who have produced a list of tips for employees who wish to approach and support colleagues who have been affected by suicide.

Dr. Paul Wong is a clinical psychologist and Associate Professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at The University of Hong Kong. He has been involved in suicide prevention research and mental health promotion and practice in Hong Kong since 2003.

Welcome Paul. Thank you for sharing with the CMHA HK community. What is the current situation on suicide deaths in Hong Kong?

The latest figures from the Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention (CSR/P) is that in 2019, there were 974 suicide deaths (rate = 13.0 per 100,000) in Hong Kong. Similar to previous years, people aged 60 or above had the highest suicide rate and among 15-24 year-olds in Hong Kong, suicide is the leading cause of unnatural death. Generally speaking, the suicide rates among all age groups in the past 10 years have remained relatively stable.

The theme for this year's World Suicide Prevention Day is 'Creating Hope Through Action'. Can you share with us what this means to you?

To me, this theme encourages people to 'do something', be it big or small, to care for people who are in distress. Everyone, yes, all of us, can do something. Just saying "hello" or "thank you" to people who are in distress may mean a lot to them already.

What's your advice for people who are living through the global pandemic in regards to mental health?

It is important to remember that over the last 18 months, Covid-19 has created increased feelings of isolation and vulnerability in people. With the improvement of the situation (as of September 2021), many social activities are close to being back to 'normal'. My advice is to cherish the chances of being able to socialise again and support each other when we can.

Ann Pearce lost her 15-year-old son Jamie to suicide in February 2017. In memory of Jamie she set up *The Weez Project*, a community group working to increase awareness of youth mental health issues and campaigning to prevent youth suicide. Ann candidly shares her story **'Losing a child to suicide'** on *The Weez Project* website.

Welcome, Ann. Firstly, thank you for sharing your personal experience with the CMHA HK community.

Suicide is the leading cause of unnatural death for 15-24 year olds in Hong Kong*. From your experience since your son's death, what can be done to bring about change to this terrible statistic?

We all have a part to play in preventing suicide. It requires a whole community approach; public health, government, local services, NGOs, youth groups and schools, as well as each of us. As individuals, we need to be open to talk about suicide and to become informed about mental health and suicide. This will help break down the stigma around these topics. With greater knowledge and understanding, conversations can take place and young people can feel better able to reach out to seek help. This way, the people around them would have the confidence to be able to support them. Granting equal status to mental and physical health would also help to give mental health the attention it deserves.

One of the aims of The Weez Project is to educate parents and the wider community so that they better understand youth mental health issues. How can education in the workplace support this?

The workplace is a good channel to communicate and educate people about youth mental health issues. If the workplace offers mental health education/training, the scope can be extended beyond colleagues and into the home. The learning foundations and techniques are similar. If the organisation has a continuing education

programme, they can include family/youth mental health training as a learning option. Employers can make resources easily available to staff.

When young people join an employer, their induction should include dealing with stress and managing their personal wellbeing and mental health. Employers should acknowledge the new stresses of the workplace and advise on how the employer can help.

Your own professional background is in finance and education. Knowing what you know now, what, in your opinion, could employers be doing for employees who may be affected (directly or indirectly) by youth suicide?

Employers should make professional counselling services available. They should communicate sensitively with the employee, allowing them to steer the conversations as they wish, and to decide how much they would like to share and the frequency of these kinds of conversations. They should take care not to be intrusive or push them too fast, and avoid linking any conversation with other workplace issues.

Employers should show actively that they care and work sympathetically with the employee.

What does the 2021 World Suicide Prevention Day theme 'Creating Hope Through Action' mean to you?

It's an endorsement that suicide can be prevented and that we can do so by people being prepared to get involved and learn more, pushing their personal boundaries to reject stigma. To echo *The Weez Project* campaign line "Talk, Listen and Care about Youth Suicide", there are plenty of practical

*Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention

ways in which we can each make a difference by directly supporting and looking out for those around us.

How can employers and employees help? How can colleagues support those who are dealing with the suicide death of a loved one?

Allow the employee time and space to deal with the trauma. Check in regularly to see if they are okay and be guided by them on how much they would like to share and the frequency of these kinds of conversations. Take care not to be intrusive or to push them too fast, and avoid linking any conversation on this topic with other workplace issues.

Is there anything else you would like to add? Do you have any advice for those living with young people as to how they can start conversations to discuss the potential risk openly?

Be open, honest and ensure you listen carefully, without judgement. Conversations can begin by following up on an observation. For example, “I notice you’ve been looking sad or not your usual self recently. Are you okay?” You can also start a conversation by talking about your own emotions, showing the young person there is no shame in doing so and providing reassurance that you are there for them and you love them.

We would like to thank **Odile Thiang, Anti-Stigma Project Manager at Mind HK** for her review and input into this document.

Esther Wong, a Clinical Advisor with Mind HK shares some tips for employees to approach and support colleagues who have been affected by suicide:

1. Sometimes, less is more. When we see people in pain, we often want to do something to help them. When we can’t, we feel pretty helpless. In sensitive situations though, we may not know what to do or what to say, and we may end up scrambling for “the right words”. Acknowledge that people are affected by suicide in different ways and, as such, there are no absolute right or wrong things to say. Sometimes, less is indeed more. Something simple such as “I am sorry for your loss” or “Let me know if I can do anything to make your day a bit easier” will go a long way. At the same time, do not ignore the elephant in the room. It is OK to ask “How are you doing?”, or “Do you need a minute?”, or to make them a cup of tea then carry on with the task at hand.

2. Be prepared that they may not want to talk about it. Sometimes people do not

want to talk about what has happened, or they may behave not a lot differently than before. They may appear “normal”, and want to talk about the weather instead. This is OK too. This is their way of coping. Please do not take it personally if you offer a listening ear and they tell you they are fine. Also, do consider your position in the company. If your role is to performance manage this person, another option may be to signpost and ask someone else on the team to have a quick check in.

3. Notice and acknowledge ahead of time if this situation makes you uncomfortable. For some of us, the idea that someone close to us is experiencing something so intense can be very scary or uncomfortable for us. This is not something most of us have had experience with. It is important we acknowledge

this before we try to find ways to help them. If we are extremely uncomfortable with the situation, it is likely that the person will feel this too, and subsequently feel their pain is making other people uncomfortable. If you feel as though you are not equipped to talk to them, that is OK. You can direct them to someone else or offer practical support.

4. Help them in practical ways. This could be as simple as making them a cup of tea in the morning, helping them with work (that is reasonable within the scope of your responsibilities), giving them updates as to what they may have missed, if they have taken time off,

or offer to attend a meeting on their behalf so they have more flexibility in terms of time.

5. Avoid telling them you've been through the same thing or you understand how they feel (e.g. I know how you feel, my best friend had a heart attack last year. It was a sudden death too.), even if it comes from a good place. When we say that, what we want to do is let the other person know they are not alone, and they can come to us should they want to talk. However, each death, and each suicide, is different and we don't want the other person to feel unseen in the complexity of such a complicated grief.

Tips for employees who have been affected by suicide - Esther Wong, Clinical Advisor at Mind HK

1. Grief is a complicated process. There is no one way to grieve, or a guide for how you "should be" feeling. This process involves on-going emotions and reactions, and it's called a process because grief ranges in duration and intensity and happens over the course of time, without a specific end point. Whether it be intense sadness, overwhelming guilt or anger that you cannot explain, or pure numbness; acknowledge that there is no right way to grieve and no emotions that you have are wrong. Be kind and compassionate to yourself and give yourself time to process those feelings, without judgement.

2. Understand that it may trigger feelings related to other losses in your life which may add to the complexity of emotions you may experience. If your grief is so intense that it is affecting your daily functioning for a prolonged period of time (e.g. you are unable to get out of bed, eat meals, sleep, leave your home) or if you are having thoughts about suicide,

then it is important that you seek medical or mental health support immediately. Make time to see your doctor, a psychiatrist or go straight to the nearest hospital emergency department. Please also look at the resources from Mind HK for a range of mental health support resources: <https://www.mind.org.hk/find-help-now/>

3. Be honest with your boss and colleagues about your needs during this difficult time. They may want to support you but appear reluctant to offer as they do not know what would help. If you are able to, be specific about how you are affected and what you would find helpful. For example, you may need to take some time off if you've lost someone very close to you. Or you may be struggling to focus due to a lack of sleep and therefore your productivity may be lower and thus you need extensions for certain deadlines. You may need more flexible hours during this time if your family is also extremely affected by the suicide, or maybe you simply need to work in a

smaller/quieter work place away from people.

4. It is common for a person to feel guilty when someone close to them takes their life. We are often left with all the “should haves” and “could haves” - as we want to be able to find a reason or an explanation for such a tragedy. It is important, however, to

acknowledge that the feeling of guilt is a feeling, but it is not a truth. We may feel guilty, but it does not mean we are guilty. There is rarely a single cause for suicide and as such, it is pointless to find a reason for it. At the same time, it might be helpful to process such feelings of guilt with a friend, family member or a professional.

For further information on Suicide Prevention in Hong Kong, please visit:

- [Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention](#)
- [Suicide Prevention Services](#)
- [Samaritans Hong Kong](#)
- [Mind HK](#)

Youth Mental Health (Hong Kong) resources and initiatives:

- [The Weez Project](#)
- [Cool Minds](#)
- [KELY Support Group](#)
- [#HearforYou](#) (Facebook HK campaign supporting local non-profit organisations)
- [#HOWRU Virtual Walkathon 2021](#) (Co-organised by Samaritans Hong Kong)



香港城市精神健康聯盟

City Mental Health Alliance HK

The City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong is a collaborative venture founded by city businesses. Championed by senior leaders, the Alliance is business led and expert guided and aims to create a culture of good mental health for workers in the city of Hong Kong, share best practice and increase mental health understanding.

CONTACT

For more information, please email: info@cmhahk.org

Website: cmhahk.org

LinkedIn: [City Mental Health Alliance Hong Kong](#)