



The burden of living with, and caring for, a suicidal family member

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Background

Families have a role in caring for a suicidal family member and in the prevention of future suicide.

However, the impact that the suicidal behaviour of a family has on these voluntary carers is poorly understood.

On a global scale there is very little published research in this important area.

Ethical Issues

The research team acknowledged the sensitive nature of this project.

- Peer Review
- UU Filter Committee
- UU Research Ethical Committee

Protection Protocols

Participant Protocol:

- Mental Health First Aid
- Follow-up counselling support Services (Statutory and Non-Statutory)

Researcher Protocol:

- UU Lone worker Policy

Participants

- Media Call via press release.
- 21 from throughout Northern Ireland voluntarily contacted the team on a secure dedicated telephone number.
- 18 met inclusion criteria.
- Males 4 and 14 females.
- Aged 25 – 78 years.
- 7 had experienced the suicidal death of a family member after several years of exhibiting suicidal behaviour.
- At the time of the interview, 11 participants living with a suicidal family member.

Methods

- Phenomenological approach
- Semi structured Interview
- Digitally recorded
- 25 – 110 minutes
- Verbatim Transcription
- Thematic Analysis (Newall & Burnard, 2006).

Emergent Themes

There was one overarching Theme:

Living with a suicidal family member is 'Hard Work for the whole family'

There were 4 Sub Themes:

- i) Family burden,
- ii) competing pressures,
- iii) secrecy and shame and
- iv) helplessness and guilt.

Family Burden

Participants described how their caring responsibilities impacted on various activities of living over a prolonged period of time.

Family Burden

One father, described 27 years of living with the threat of suicide by relating:

"My life's ruined, he's been like that for 27 years, I've had no life, my wife has had no life, my family's had no life, it has destroyed our family" (Participant 07)

Another reported how her schooling was affected:

"It was a very hard time for me. It was really difficult but I wanted to survive, I had to survive. It was a hard life, no enjoyment and very scary at times." (Participant 14)

Competing Pressures

Parents and siblings alike all have their daily lives to organise and run. However, the threat of suicide by a family member is over and above the usual daily stressful life issues, which continue regardless.

Competing Pressures

A daughter reflected on how her father's attempts at suicide affected her ability to socialise with friends:

*"You feel guilty almost about going out of the house, you feel frightened about coming home again because you think what are you going to come home to? You certainly wouldn't come home in the dark because you wouldn't know what you'd walk into."
(Participant 04)*

Secrecy and Shame

Participants were asked, by their suicidal family member, not speak about their suicidal behaviour.

Participants felt there was a stigma about suicidal behaviour and had feelings of shame and were concerned about what other people such as neighbours, friends and extended family members thought.

Secrecy and Shame

A father speaking about his teenage son's behaviour said:

"You're living here with people around you and you're preserving a façade of normality and life very much went on, you adjusted to the situation, you know, and you just braced yourself for when things was gonna go out of hand. You talked to the neighbours and the neighbours didn't know, as far as we know, maybe they did but as far as they knew, everything was grand and normal,... , you were embarrassed. It was (we pretended to be) just like a normal family." (Participant 05)

Helplessness and Guilt

Participants described strong feelings of helplessness, powerlessness and alienation as they tried to care for their family member.

Helplessness and Guilt

A wife speaking about how she felt after the first time her husband tried to kill himself stated:

"I felt very guilty about things and I blamed myself and I needed help too. She (the nurse) was very nice and I know she would have felt like talking to me but I didn't want to tell people.... (pause)but I think that was me really. I felt guilty and more alone in that I didn't have my friends or my family with me I didn't want to talk to other people but I think I wanted to, ...(pause) ...I don't knowto hide it really." (Participant 16)

Summary

The participants' stories reveal the significant burden that the suicidal behaviour of a relative has on them and other family members.

Carers constantly worry and ruminate on the potential suicide of their relative.

Normal daily activities are seriously curtailed and the level of helplessness and distress that carers feel is profound

Health care professionals need to acknowledge the burden experienced by volunteer carers in their struggle to cope with the suicidal behaviour of a family member.

References

McLaughlin C, McGowan I, O'Neill S, Kernohan G. (2014). *The burden of living with and caring for a suicidal family member*. Journal of Mental Health, 23 (5), 236-240.

Newall, R. & Burnard, P. (2006). *Vital notes for nurses: Research for evidence-based practice*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd