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Supporting the Supporters:
How Adolescent Females Respond to a Friend
Who Engages in Non-Suicidal Self-Injury.

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Abstract

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a maladaptive coping strategy employed by young people in response to feelings of distress. Adolescents are more likely to communicate engagement in NSSI with their peers whom they turn to for support. How young people respond to peers engaging in self-harm, how this impacts the friendship, and how these supporters cope with assuming and administering this role are largely unknown. A qualitative methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), was chosen for this project in order to explore and understand the sense-making experiences of participants. Five female, Year 10 students from a single school in the Hawke's Bay were interviewed. Five themes were identified including NSSI and relationships, burden and responsibility, the helping response, costs of caring, and supporter needs.

The results highlighted the complex nature of this helping relationship and emphasised the need for increased and multifaceted forms of support to be provided to those responding to a peer engaging in self-harm. Young people indicated several factors that would be helpful to assist support providers to continue to help peers in distress including access to information about effective ways to support a friend engaging in NSSI and to be providing this support within a network that functions to resource and support the supporters. High schools are challenged to engage young people in the design and structure of student health and well-being services in their school, and the implementation of a student-led mentoring programme that caters for the support needs of the supporter is advocated.

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the adolescents who participated in this project, sharing their experiences and insights with such honesty and openness, and to all the other brave supporters out there. Kia kaha!

*Hope is like a road in the country;
there was never a road, but when many people walk on it,
the road comes into existence*

– Lyn Yutang

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