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How do lay people interpret and respond to suicide warning
signs?

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree
of Master of Arts in Psychology.

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ABSTRACT

Suicide is a worldwide problem with over 800,000 people dying by suicide every year, and many more attempting suicide or thinking of suicide. Despite prevention efforts, suicide rates are increasing. One promising area of prevention is educating the public to recognise and respond to suicidal signs. Yet knowledge of this area is currently lacking in the literature, especially in New Zealand. The aim of this study was to understand and explore how lay people in New Zealand currently interpret and respond to suicidal signs. A second aim was to assess whether there were gender or age group differences. A mixed methods approach was used that included a validated questionnaire and a semi-structured vignette interview developed specifically for the study. Participants were 24 adults from one location in New Zealand, grouped equally by gender and age (20-30 years or 40-50 years). The results reveal a number of psychological, cognitive, and communicative barriers to interpretation and intervention, and a lack of intervention knowledge. Small gender and age group differences are also revealed. These findings have implications and recommendations for suicide prevention strategies in New Zealand.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have greatly enjoyed writing my Master's thesis this year. It would not have been possible without these people.

First and foremost, my husband Chris. You have given me your unwavering support and encouragement this year, and enabled me to pursue my goals- so thank you.

Without your support, I would not have been able to undertake this study.

To my children Cullen, Ava, and Lulu. Thank you for being understanding when I have had to write or have been distracted with my research. You brighten my life each and every day and I love you.

I must thank my supervisor Dr John Fitzgerald. I am so grateful for your feedback, advice, and support. You are a great supervisor and I feel very fortunate to have worked with you this year.

Thank you to the Massey University Human Ethics Committee for your comments, feedback, and approval.

Finally, I would like to thank my 24 participants- thank you for choosing to take part in this research. It would not have been possible without you.

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