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**WORKING WITH DISTRESSED ADOLESCENTS AND  
PROFESSIONAL INTERVENTION**  
**Adolescent Suicide and Professional Response in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
**Master of Philosophy**  
at  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis shows in the first part an analysis about the reasons why in particular adolescents are vulnerable for suicidal and self-destructive behaviour. It also shows what helping possibilities, prevention and intervention ideas can be found. This review of international and national literature about adolescence, suicide and prevention creates the theoretical framework for the research project. It shows that the youth suicide rate in New Zealand ranges amongst the highest of many OECD countries. During the past few years much research on risk factors and possible prevention strategies has been undertaken. Mental health problems, antisocial behaviour, problems with the family, at schools or with peers and low self-esteem have been identified by many studies as risk factors for teenage suicidality. As a response, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Youth Affairs as well as Te Puni Kokiri pushed further research and projects forward to investigate recommendations for projects and services to support young people and to reduce risk factors for suicidality.

Based on this literature review the qualitative research of this thesis explores a developmental group (N.E.X.T) of a non-governmental youth-oriented organisation (Youthline) as one way of supporting adolescents concerning a healthy development into adults by strengthening them, improving their self-esteem and reducing the risk for untreated mental health problems. These are all factors identified within the literature review as risk factors for suicidality. By this example the thesis shows what the needs of teenagers are, whether an organisation like Youthline can meet these needs and which skills professionals at Youthline therefore need to have. It further explores whether the theoretical prevention ideas can be realised within a service like Youthline and what limitations can be found.

Findings of the research suggest that most of the adolescent participants involved have really enjoyed the group and almost all of them realised significant changes in their behaviour, attitude, especially their own self-esteem, which can be understood as a

protection factor against suicidality. That the statements of the professionals further fit perfectly together with the teenager's statements suggests a good basis for real youth-oriented assistance which has the potential to strengthen young people in New Zealand and therefore reduce risk factors for suicidality.

The thesis concludes with recommendations for policy and future research, especially concerning the funding of social services.

Dedicated to the Memory of my Cousin

**Sveni**

who killed himself during the writing of this thesis  
and therewith gave this thesis  
a very personal meaning.

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When I turn out the light  
and go to bed  
I lie hoping for a new and better tomorrow.  
But thoughts of reality creep from the shadows  
in which I try to keep them hidden  
during the brightness of my days.  
They tell me there are no promises, no guarantees  
and no assurance.  
There is emptiness, loneliness, fear,  
guilt, shame.  
And I allow no tears, though they do want me.  
Tomorrow is new  
but will it bring peace and laughter and acceptance?  
I will get lost in tomorrow,  
like today, like yesterday.  
I will cry where no one can see – inside.  
And drown a little more beneath those tears.  
I will hold them tightly and safely,  
and will not let them go  
like I wish someone would do to me.

- Tanya (a teenager)

(adapted from a longer poem).

(Crook, 1997: 108)