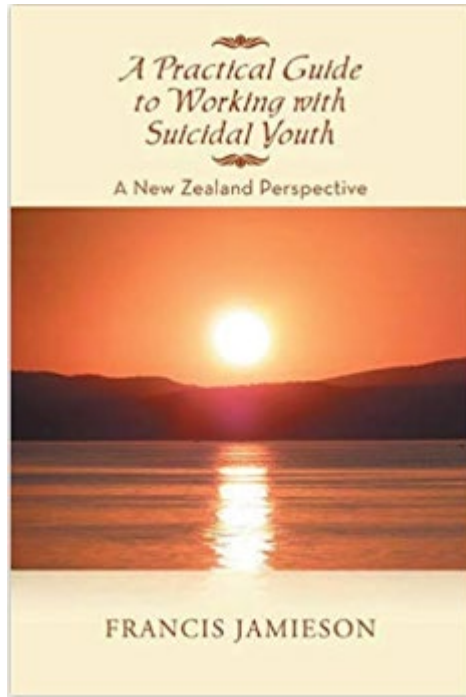


## A real help for dealing with suicidal youth

### **A Practical guide to Working with Suicidal Youth, A New Zealand Perspective.**

By Francis Jamieson. Xlibris Reviewed by Kirk Vette (Youthline)



This is a refreshingly honest and practical book that is well worth the read (I was not looking forward to this read due to the nature of the topic).

Francis Jamieson is a school counsellor who also runs a private practice. He has worked in the mental health field for many years.

- Overview: The book is divided in to five parts:
- Part one; aspects of teenage development
- Part two; the session
- Part three; the session what happened? Interventions
- Part four; intervention post suicide of a student
- Part five; why is teenage suicide such a phenomenon in New Zealand?

I like the structure of the book; it flows and is well thought out. The use of case studies brings the topic and interventions to life. They make it all very real and capture the desperation and immediacy of the situation.

The author talks about potency in his work and this is very clearly expressed in his recounting of these sessions, I loved it. His honesty about thinking and acting outside of the box with suicidal young people is inspiring. I liked the use of humour, gremlins and the self-care plan. The integration of theory and practice that the author describes shows a depth of knowledge and experience.

It is accessible and informative if you do have a lot of experience working with suicidal young people, it may not be as helpful for practitioners who don't. I get a sense of the author's strength and conviction when he talks about post intervention experiences.

The book's final part addresses the big questions of why is teenage suicide such a big phenomenon in this country. How do you cover that in a mere thirty-one pages? You state the topic then you discuss treatment implications. It's concise, clear and well thought out.

I found myself drifting off a little when reading them as sadly the problems are all too common and it breaks my heart to read through them knowing that too many young people in our nation are struggling.

In short, the book lives up to its title - it is a practical guide. If you are working with vulnerable young people, it is well worth reading and having on your bookshelf. I think it is the kind of book that you can pick up and gather information from at various times.

I want to acknowledge the work that the author has done in helping save the lives of young people in New Zealand. You don't get to write a book like this without a lot of experience. Thank you, Francis.

#### 1 Comment

Rob Hunter #1 Friday, 2 October 2015 9:26AM

I found Francis Jamieson's book A Practical guide to working with suicidal youth a New Zealand Perspective to be reader friendly practical and humorous guide to working with suicidal youth. He manages to talk about this tough subject in a way that has heart and wisdom. The author delivers a nice balance between theory and practice. I would definitely recommend this book as a part of any therapist/ counsellors' library.

## The New Zealand Herald – 20.10.16

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### Teen suicides: something must change say devastated parents



Brendan Russell put on his suit bought specially for the Tauranga Boys' College ball.

He looked handsome, athletic, tall - his trademark blonde curls cut when he had been recently appointed prefect. All the girls loved his hair -it was a great drawcard.

Nearing the end of his school year, he had much to be proud of. He had just finished a lead role on stage at the High School Stage Challenge, was in a barbershop quartet, was achieving high grades academically, and was an enthusiastic volunteer working with younger children.

It was Monday night and the ball was coming up Saturday. The popular 18-year-old 1st XV rugby player and rower had been looking forward to attending the party with all his friends in their final school year. He had a strong group of mates and hundreds of Facebook friends.

That Monday, he did what he did most nights: chilled out in his room. A bit of music, Facebook.

He watched Breaking Bad. When his mum, Meg, had to call him a few times to come out to dinner, he called back to her he wanted to finish the first season.

After dinner, he gave his mum a hug as he did every night. The Russells are a loving, close-knit family. He told his sister, Kristin, his only sibling and soul mate: "I love you, don't ever forget it."



Meg Russell shares her memories of her rugby playing son Brendan who committed suicide. Photo/George Novak.

The next day they were to celebrate her 21st birthday.

Brendan Russell never got to say 'Happy Birthday'. He never made it to his first school ball. Instead he died that night in August 2012.

His mother, Meg Russell, found him the next morning, still in his ball suit. A coroner ruled his death self-inflicted.

Four years on, his devastated mother is calling for an end to the stigma of suicide. It was a stigma so strong that after her son died, she asked for a job transfer to Rotorua so that she didn't have to face people in Tauranga.



Meg Russell is speaking out about her son who committed suicide in a hope to inspire others to open up Photo/ George Novak.

"As a mother I felt people would judge me. I couldn't even face going to the supermarket as I felt people were saying - 'oh look, there is the mother whose son killed himself, wonder why?' I started to commute every day to work in Rotorua just to avoid people I knew. Some people I didn't have to avoid because they avoided me."

In the years following Brendan's death one question she dreaded from people she didn't know was, 'How many children do you have?'

"It was always a dilemma. Do I go for the easy option and say 'just one'. Or do I say, 'two, but one passed away'. Then they would say 'Oh I am sorry how awful, how?'



"Then I would say, 'he took his own life'. Or 'he died by suicide'. If I said that, I would mostly get a look of horror and they would make a rapid retreat.'

But some didn't. Some started telling her stories of people they knew, or their family members who had taken their own lives. "I started to realise the scale of the problem at the same time I started to realise no one wanted to talk about it."

This, says Russell, must change.

*"I want to talk about it...I love to talk about Brendan. If he had died of cancer, or in a road accident, people would happily sit here and talk with me about what happened. But no one talks about suicide." - Meg Russell*

Now 45, she wants to talk about her son's suicide, to warn parents to talk about it.

"I want to talk about it...I love to talk about Brendan. If he had died of cancer, or in a road accident, people would happily sit here and talk with me about what happened. But no one talks about suicide."

She warns me she will cry. She does. Losing her only son is as painful today as it was back on that August morning. Yet through the tears is the determination of a mother who does not want others to go through this.

Russell set up a Facebook page in memory of her son.

One post reads: "Don't let the tragedy of how they died overshadow the beauty of their lives." Brendan's friends still post there. Russell still talks to Brendan's best mate nearly every day.

"We need to be talking more to our teens... especially boys. Girls, they talk more to each other, but boys hold it in. Parents need to be specific with their kids, ask if they are okay, often, and be direct, ask 'do you want to hurt yourself?'

"Every parent needs to know, this could happen. Don't think, 'oh my child would never do that'. Don't be in the dark about what they are up to or they are feeling... I never thought it could happen. Brendan had so so many friends...so many people who loved him...800 people attended his funeral. We were struck by a bomb."

As well as parents being more aware, Russell believes there should be more formal "resilience training" in the school curriculum.

"Skylight run a good school programme called Traveller. But it needs to be at all ages, from intermediate through to college, covering issues like how to deal with grief and trauma, bullying, relationships. If there was more teaching at a younger age to cope with feelings, kids can more easily cope with what life throws."

More openness, she believes, could prevent more deaths, and help reduce New Zealand's alarming suicide rates.

## OUR NATIONAL TRAGEDY

More Kiwis are killing themselves than ever. The coroners' latest provisional statistics on suicide, released on Tuesday, showed 579 Kiwis died by suicide in 2015/16 - 409 men and 170 women.

This number is the worst it has been since the Coroner's Office began keeping records in 2008.

In the Bay of Plenty, suicides hit a five-year high, with 35 people taking their own life.

In the Lakes district, suicides doubled from the previous year. There, 21 people died at their own hand, up from 10 the previous year.



Alarming, more young people are taking their lives than ever before. New Zealand continuously ranks among the worst youth suicide rates in the world according to OECD reports.

*"More effort is put into winning the Bledisloe Cup than stopping our kids killing themselves."* - Father David Hurn

In 2016, according to these latest figures, 59 people under 19 took their own life including eight children under between 10 and 14.

When a suspected suicide occurs and the child is at school, the school may contact the the Ministry of Education's traumatic incident team.

Kim Shannon, head of sector enablement and support, says the ministry collects data on traumatic incidents when a request for support has been made and a suspected suicide would be categorised as a sudden death.

Shannon says it should be noted that the category of sudden death includes a range of things apart from a suspected suicide, for example, sudden death could be as a result of an undiagnosed medical condition, as a result of a fatal asthma attack, or unknown cause

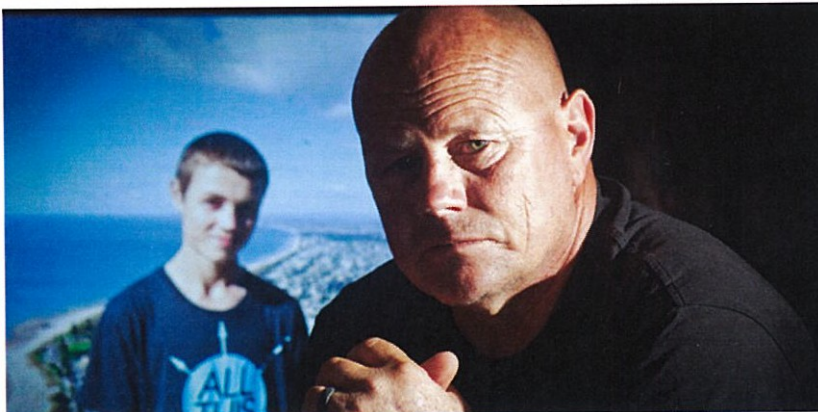
"When there is a suspected suicide the traumatic incident team often works in partnership with the local District Health Board child and adolescent mental health services and police to identify and support vulnerable young people affected by the suicide."

The ministry's trauma team has attended 50 sudden deaths in 2016 from January to the end of September. These include six in the Bay of Plenty. In the previous period in 2015, there were 12 sudden deaths attended to in the Bay of Plenty, and 53 in total nationally.

## ONE FATHER'S MISSION

"Statistics, statistics, bloody statistics. How many more statistics do we need? The media are fed suicide statistics until they are coming out of our ears. How many more numbers and so called experts do we need?"

Mount Maunganui father David Hurn, 51, is frustrated at "the lack of practical action" on New Zealand's rising suicide rates, particularly given the increasing number of young people dying.



David Hurn reveals what it is like to lose a son to suicide Photo/Andrew Warner.

"We are losing our future, our brilliant minds. It is a national tragedy. An epidemic. This country has a massive problem with suicide, but what are we doing about it? We are lagging behind the rest of the world. More effort is put into winning the Bledisloe Cup than stopping our kids killing themselves."

There are, he says, lots of "ambulances at the bottom of the cliff, but not a lot of fences at the top". Hurn doesn't want any more ambulances or statistics or pamphlets. Especially pamphlets.

"I have a memory of holding my son's body. He was still warm. There was a person there trying to give me bloody pamphlets. "

My son was dead. Out of the blue. Gone from this world. His own choice. Do I want a bloody pamphlet? No, but I want something to change."

Hurn has a simple message which he wears on the back of his black t-shirt.

*"He was still warm. There was a person there trying to give me bloody pamphlets. My son was dead. Out of the blue. Gone from this world. His own choice. Do I want a bloody pamphlet? No, but I want something to change."* - Father David Hurn

It reads: "Suicide victims are not "weak", "selfish" or "cowards". They are fathers, mothers, son, daughters, husband, wives, brothers, sisters. Raise awareness not stigma."

He wears it often. People notice and stop to tell him their stories. Once he nearly missed his plane when an airport security guard stopped to talk about his two cousins and his brother, all who had taken their own life. When he wears it to walk up the Mount, it takes him ages to get to the top because people stop to ask to take photos of it.

"I listen to their stories, and I tell them mine."

Hurn's son Kaleb took his own life two years ago at just 17. He had just started a university course studying computer sciences. Like Brendan Russell, David said his son had no history of mental illness, none of the "stereotypes" about people who kill themselves.

"He wasn't into drugs or drink...there had been no warning, nothing at all, it came totally out the blue."

Kaleb had been due to spend the weekend at his father's beachfront bach. They used to spend weekends together, at the beach, walking up the Mount.

"He phoned to cancel. He said he had a birthday party. I told him 'No worries mate, I will catch up with you when you next come over.' Later that day I missed a call from him. I called him back but he didn't answer. The next day he was gone."

Hurn took his son up the Mount for the last time to scatter his ashes there.

At the summit, there is a memorial of shells and stones collected by his many friends and family including Hurn's daughter, Kaleb's younger sister, who was "devastated she had lost her big brother". It rocked his friends.

Hurn, a tough construction manager, a biker in leather with tattoos and scars, openly cries.

"I still cry. Several times a week. The impact suicide has, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Like Meg Russell, after Kaleb's death, David realised there was a stigma about suicide.

"People didn't want to talk about it. I have met families where some never admit their child died from suicide."

Like Meg Russell, he wants to talk.

"While I don't agree with what Kaleb did, I am not going to back down from it." Staying silent about suicide, he believes, is what is fuelling the country's rising rates.

"We need to get rid of this taboo. Silence is suicide's friend. If you have a dirty floor and sweep it under the carpet after a month you get a hump that gets bigger and bigger and then one day you got a real problem and it blows back in your face. "

With his own race bike and Harley Davidson, Hurn is a member of RATS - Riders against Teenage Suicide, which organises rides from Northland through to the Eastern Bay, taking the message about suicide to communities. It also runs a Facebook support page.

"We need to talk to our kids. Boys in particular bottle things up. It is part of our culture. Rugby, racing, beer. Girls cry, boys don't. Take a concrete pill. Struggling is perceived as weakness. That's the culture I grew up in, but it has got to change...when we are out on our bikes, there are tough men, really hard men, and they will say to the kids, it is okay to put up our hands and admit when we need help."

He warns parents not to think it could never happen.

"At Kaleb's funeral I wanted to go up to every one of his hundreds of friends, eyeball them and ask them if they were okay. The night of the funeral a work colleague said he went home and had a big heart to heart with his daughter. We need to talk. Properly. How many times do we say to each other, 'how are you?', but then we walk on without even waiting to listen for an answer."

It requires, he says, a culture shift.

"Look how years ago, it was accepted girls had to fit a certain mould, cook, clean, look a certain body. Rightly there was a backlash on that and things are different. The same massive shift has to happen for our young men, that they don't have to fit a stereotype."

*"More effort is put into winning the Bledisloe Cup than stopping our kids killing themselves."* - Father David Hurn

He agrees with Meg Russell that suicide prevention should be part of the school curriculum and needs proper funding.

"The suicide rate is double the road toll. Look how much is spent on road safety messages to prevent deaths on the road. How much do we spend educating our children?"

Children need to be taught tools from a young age how to cope with set backs, he says.

"We teach our kids to cook, drive a car. Do we teach them to sit down and breathe, sit in the sun, talk about feelings, how to deal with things, look out for their mates?"



## WHY ARE SO MANY YOUNG PEOPLE DYING BY SUICIDE?

There is no definitive answer, says Daniel Coppersmith, a Fulbright graduate studying the prevention of youth suicide and self-harm at the University of Otago.

Admitting this is the first step to beginning to better understand the problem of youth suicide and starting to help, he says.

"If it was known exactly why New Zealand's youth suicide rates were so high relative to other OECD countries, it would be easier to reduce the rates.

"Better understanding this would require a large multinational study. The World Health Organisation ran such a study called "World Mental Health Survey", but that was with only adults. More research into youth suicide in New Zealand would likely improve our understanding of why the rates are so high."

There are some possible reasons around our geography, says Coppersmith.

"Rural areas, social isolation, and relatively small communities could put youth at risk... small communities might also increase the stigma around help-seeking. Additionally, in these small communities the lack of specialized mental health services may contribute."

Coppersmith says suicide may appear out of the blue as experienced by parents such as Russell and Hurn. It is important to note that prior mental illness was not the only risk factor for suicide.

"The World Health Organization estimates that 350 million people suffer from depression globally, but approximately 800,000 people die by suicide every year."

Coppersmith was motivated to study suicide prevention after being touched by tragedy in his own teenage years when two teenagers in his hometown took their own lives including one at his school.

"Grief and confusion permeated the entire town. I felt immense sadness for everyone affected and wondered how such widespread suffering could be prevented. These experiences contributed to my decision to pursue this area of work."

He agrees with David Hurn and Meg Russell the first step in suicide prevention is talking and removing the stigma. Stigma is a significant factor why a child may hide symptoms of depression or other mental illness, so reducing stigma and having open and honest conversations about mental health would be significant in suicide prevention he said.

## THE CORONER AND THE KING

A book on youth suicide on the bedside table is not everyone's idea of bedtime reading but in Rotorua, Coroner Wallace Bain is a man at the coalface of the rise in youth suicide, and who is concerned about what he calls "New Zealand's epidemic."

The book by Pakuranga College counsellor and psychotherapist Francis Jamieson says there is a spiritual crisis in which 60 to 70 per cent of New Zealand high school children contemplate suicide at some point, and explores why, as well as practical ideas to reduce these risks.

Bain points to the inquest of Kawerau teen, 17-year-old Jordan Leigh Gray, who took his own life on in October 2010. The findings in the inquest, he says, set out the "quandary" about the rules on media reporting of suicide, which in New Zealand is restricted under the Coroner's Act.

The coroner says on the one hand, to talk about suicide is a preventative measure, but on the other hand, some experts fear more discussion about suicides could spark copycat deaths. Jordan's death was one of five suicides in the small mill town.

However, expert evidence given cumulatively at the conclusion of the inquests by Dr Candy Cookson-Cox found no evidence to suggest the suicides were "clustered".

Bain says these inquests sparked the Law Commission review of the Coroner's Act which eventually this June was changed relax some of the media's reporting on suspected suicides. It is a change Bain believes is right, that responsible reporting, still with the necessary cautions in the Act, may help to get some of the issues around suicide aired with the aim being prevention of future suicides.

It was at a hui about the Kawerau suicides where Bain met entertainer Mike King, whose radio show The Nutters Club was gaining attention for making positive changes about the way people view mental health.

"I got him up to speak and he was brilliant at it."

The pair since have done what Bain calls "gigs" in local schools, called the Coroner and the King.

"Mike talks to the kids about what help and support there is, how not to bottle it up, things are not the end of the world... I talk about how rates of alcohol and cannabis consumption can play a high role in suicide, particularly with younger males. Then there are relationship problems."

In his experience, it is particularly a trait of young men that "they cannot talk about things, or have no one to talk to". In the sessions with King, Bain sees first hand the positive impact of the kids being able to share stories.

"I have seen Mike's phone the next day, full of messages asking for help, he runs a Facebook page and reaches thousands."

Despite the positive way social media can connect young people, Bain is concerned about the role it plays in the increase in youth suicide rates.

"I am certain from what I see that the rise in social media has impact."

He cites the recent inquests into four Hawkes Bay teenagers who died between 2013 and 2014. All four had been subject to online bullying.

Bain says people would be "staggered" at the content and scale of online bullying which he has seen when collecting evidence for inquests.

"I tell teenagers, I can undress you. Meaning what you out online stays there. I have seen all sorts of vicious bullying, a pack mentality in texts, and Facebook."

Another preventative move could be more sharing of information.

"I really highlighted that in the Nia Glassie case but it is also very relevant in suicide prevention. Information needs to be shared, between agencies...at schools, there needs to be processes for identifying people in trouble. A mate should be able to report changes in behaviour."

Mike King's charitable trust, Key to Life, receives weekly requests for school visits. The work, says Bain, is important and needs proper funding.

"There are not enough resources."

Bain strongly believes that there should be more involvement in schools, and would like to see it in the school curriculum. "If you think about what is common among all these young people it is the schools - that is a way to reach them."

This, as well as more funding towards suicide prevention, is something he hopes the Government's newly established Suicide Committee will push for. This committee will be a key part in a new New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan.

When this committee was being formed, Bain had no hesitation in recommending one man who he thinks can really make a difference. That man got on to the committee - Mike King.

## CREATING RESILIENCE

Another man passionate about establishing an effective suicide prevention plan is Youthline chief executive Stephen Bell.

He says each time when the suicide figures are released it is a reminder that "the reality is we haven't made an impact. What we have been doing up to now is not working."

Suicide rates are "a tragedy for the country", and now more than an epidemic - he would say it is a contagion.

"Nothing else is killing young people more, not even motor vehicles. If you consider that two young people are dying every week, and another 20 hospitalised each week, if this was a disease, say meningococcal, the forces would be scrambled."

*"It is not just those dying, it is those affected, year on year so hundreds of thousands of people in our country are affected by suicide, that is the contagion."* - Youthline's Stephen Bell

Back in 2012 at the conclusion of the inquests of the five Kawerau teens, Dr Cookson-Cox mentioned the role the community environment plays in youth suicides: "We need to look at employment and the financial, recreational, health and cultural and social fabric."

This was echoed by one of the teen's mother's, Michelle Elliott, who said after the inquest

"We need to involve our communities, we need to listen to our kids and we need to ensure there is someone who they can talk to," It is an insight from a parent who knows. Youthline's Stephen Bell says looking at the environment of our communities is key,

"If you think of suicide as the ultimate way of leaving community, what is it about our community that young people don't like? What is it about our environment?"

While some of the issues young people face are the same as previous generations, Bell says there is "ease of access to things generations before did not have" including not just obvious environmental factors like drugs and alcohol, but access to porn, debt, housing.

*"The pioneering culture, do it yourself, conquer the world way has its positives but it has contributed to the fact that people feel they can admit a broken leg but not a broken heart."* - Youthline's Stephen Bell

"Young people don't have the separation of childhood that we had. We need to build an environment that is healthier for young people...where they are connected in our communities.

"If I was in charge of government I would invest in things that engage young people to address these issues, with of course the relevant professional bodies.

A shift in culture is necessary so that it is okay to ask for help,

"The pioneering culture, do it yourself, conquer the world way has its positives but it has contributed to the fact that people feel they can admit a broken leg but not a broken heart."



He agrees helping young people to be more resilient should be a core part of the school curriculum.

"The three Rs of reading, writing, arithmetic. Add another R...resilience, relationships...young people need to learn emotional first aid for themselves and their mates. Life has its ups and downs so they need to know how to navigate it. To celebrate the strength and leadership in being kind and compassionate to others, and to oneself. Asking for help."

David Hurn has his son's name, date of birth and date of death on his arm.

Meg Russell's daughter Kristin has her little brother's last ever words to her tattooed on her arm: 'I love you, don't ever forget it.' Meg Russell has the infinity sign.

In her Judea home, Meg Russell brings out a box,

"How do you put your child's life in a box?"

When she removes the lid, a strong scent of soap and shampoo fill the air. On top of a pile of Brendan's clothes and possessions she keeps the shampoo he had in the bathroom.

"Because his hair was his trademark, and I can still smell him."

As she tenderly takes items from the box she unpacks Brendan's eighteen years. His Octopus toy from when he was a baby, his kindergarten paintings, his rugby shirt with his name and number on the back, his school blazer still with his prefect's badge and yellow Daffodil he had bought for Cancer awareness.

Some of his "labels" - he was so into them says Meg. "Oh and look, all the important things," she laughs, pulling out his games Call of Duty and Black Ops. His rugby mouth guard. His suicide note. His coroner's report.

Keeping the box is a comfort, she says.

"I don't get them out often, but knowing they are here helps."

There is laughter too. On the table is another a little white wooden box tied with a ribbon. "Oh, don't show them that," laughs her partner, "they will think you are really crackers."

In the box are the ashes of Brendan's beloved cat, Voodoo, that he had had since he was eleven. The cat only died just a few days earlier.

"I will go and scatter his ashes at Pilot Bay, where we scattered Brendan's." Laughter again.

"The funny thing is if Brendan could see me here talking to you with the box he would be laughing too saying mum you are nuts."

But Brendan is not here.

Russell quietly puts her son's things away.

"He was the boy every mother could want. Oh don't get me wrong, he could be a shit too." She smiles. What does she want people reading this to know?

"He was quirky and funny and amazing, loving and caring, and just Brendan really. My son. I just don't want other mothers to lose their children this way...The country cannot keep losing its kids this way. Something has to be done. How many more kids do we have to lose?"

Where to get help:

Lifeline : 0800 543 354 (available 24/7)

Suicide Crisis Helpline: 0508 828 865 (0508 TAUTOKO) (available 24/7)

Youthline: 0800 376 633

Kidline: 0800 543 754 (available 24/7)

Whatsup: 0800 942 8787 (1pm to 11pm)

Depression helpline: 0800 111 757 (available 24/7)

Rainbow Youth: (09) 376 4155

Samaritans 0800 726 666

If it is an emergency and you feel like you or someone else is at risk, call 111