

The Herald

FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVES

by

Eleanor Cowie

7 November 2005

KERRY Dougherty was barely in her twenties when her brother killed himself. "Billy had been hearing voices in his head," she says calmly. "He told me a number of times – quite lucidly – that he would put a stop to the voices. I never thought stopping them would mean what it did." Billy's body was discovered by a family neighbour after he had hanged himself at the age of 26.

Fourteen years on, Kerry, now 36, talks about the incident with remarkable ease and candour. She is now involved in a scheme called Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), which trains mental health professionals and other care workers to approach and help those who are a potential danger to themselves.

So far, in Scotland, more than 3500 people have been trained in ASIST. The scheme, which involves a two-day workshop, gives participants an insight into suicide and highlights what are known as "invitations", clues a person contemplating suicide may betray, such as giving away possessions or talking about how low they feel.

Scotland has the highest suicide rate in the UK, and although the numbers have fallen for the past two years, last year alone 835 deaths were recorded as "intentional self-harm".

Just last month, Kerry saved one man from being included in those chilling statistics. It had started out like any routine weekend shopping trip in a busy city centre, and ended with Kerry having to apply the techniques she teaches to dissuade a man in his thirties from taking his own life.

"One of my kids pointed him out to me," says Kerry. "She said: 'Mummy, that man's strange.' I looked up and there was a guy climbing over a barrier on the top floor of the shopping centre. More and more people started to notice and there was a lot of screaming.

"The guy was obviously in very real distress, his fingers were buried in his skin, he was pulling his hair and he was beginning to sway on the ledge.

"I didn't have to think about invitations – there were clear invitations right in front of me. I knew I had to go and try to do something. I thought it would really make a mockery of what I do if I didn't." Mindful of the ever-growing danger, Kerry promptly dispatched her children off to a coffee shop with her sister while she took the lift up to the top floor. What was running through her head? Was she scared to help in case she failed, or did her ASIST training make it easier for her to approach such an intimidating, demanding task?

"Believe me, I was frightened going up [to him]," she says. "My knees were knocking because all I knew about suicide was just going round and round my head, but I was still thinking: 'What if he jumps and I say something that's going to make him . . .'"

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In what seemed like an instant, Kerry had reached Alan (not his real name), who was perched on the narrow ledge a few hundred feet above the ground floor. He was crouched, crying and rocking back and forth like a small child in distress. Kerry sat down beside him on the other side of the glass barrier and began speaking to him.

"I just said: 'I'm really frightened here, you must be even more frightened.' It was just to make a connection with him," she explains. "It seemed so artificial to just say: 'Hello, my name is Kerry, what's yours?'"

She then set about trying to understand Alan and what had led him to this point. After several minutes of softly repeating simple questions to him, he uttered a few, barely audible, jumbled sentences from which she understood that he was mourning a broken relationship and a family breakdown.

"One of the things we teach in ASIST is that the person must be clear on what they are doing," says Kerry. "So I asked Alan whether the situation was so painful that he wanted to kill himself."

This one simple word, kill, provoked an immediate reaction in him. "When I said that he looked at me. It was our first moment of eye contact. In many cases people trying to commit suicide are not really aware of what they are doing, they just want out of their pain. They are not really aware of the risk they pose to themselves or others."

A moment later, Alan reached out to touch Kerry's hand. "It was then I knew he was reaching out, wanting to be helped," she says.

But she still had some work to do to ensure his safety: "I knew he was desperately uncomfortable with everyone looking at him. I quietly suggested that he come back over [the barrier] and talk with me. I had to repeat this four or five times to him in different ways to get any reaction. I asked him to tell me why his family life was so bad that he wanted to kill himself. When the change came, much of it was non-verbal. Eventually, after five or 10 minutes, he said: 'Help me.'"

As Kerry talks about Alan, it is obvious that she has come to a mature understanding of the issues surrounding suicide. She radiates warmth and kindness. Her understanding and compassion are traits she no doubt uses to great effect in her role as trainer, and also in her full-time position as a deputy manager for a Scottish Association for Mental Health project in the east end of Glasgow. There she co-ordinates 12 care workers in the provision of regular home support for sufferers of conditions such as depression, acute depression and schizophrenia.

She is almost evangelical in the belief that ASIST is crucial to reducing suicide rates in Scotland and that public attitudes towards self-harm must change. Too much denial, secrecy and avoidance remain among those considering taking their lives, she says, and for those on the outside, it is still a taboo topic. After all, more than two people die from suicide in Scotland every day. "That's a mother, sister or daughter. A father, brother

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or son," she says.

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Developed in Canada by four mental health professionals, the Canadian Mental Health Association and the government of Alberta, ASIST was introduced here two years ago. In Scotland it is run in partnership with agencies such as SAMH, Choose Life (the Scottish Executive suicide prevention strategy) and ChildLine.

Learning how to ASIST

Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST).

WHAT IS IT?

* It is a two-day intensive, interactive and practice-based course aimed at helping people to spot the risk of suicide in others and provide immediate help to people who are at risk.

It develops skills for suicide first aid.

WHERE HAS IT COME FROM?

* ASIST started in Canada 23 years ago. Its creators wanted a suicide intervention programme that would be suitable for professionals and other care givers.

WHEN DID IT COME TO SCOTLAND?

* The first Scottish workshops were held in Shetland in 2003 and, to date, there have been more than 200 workshops throughout the country, where more than 3500 participants have trained in ASIST.

WHICH OTHER COUNTRIES USE ASIST?

* It is now the most widely used suicide intervention skills training in the world, with 3000 registered trainers in Canada, the US, Australia, New Zealand, Norway, Ireland and the rest of the UK.

ASIST has five learning sections:

1. Preparing
2. Connecting
3. Understanding
4. Assisting
5. Networking