

Responding to the needs of a person who presents with suicidality

Nathan's story

Nathan is a 30-year-old and works casually in the hospitality industry. He broke up suddenly with his girlfriend of four years after he found out that she had an affair. He was prepared to continue their relationship despite feelings of betrayal. Nathan wasn't sleeping well so went to his local GP. In conversation with his GP, Nathan disclosed he had recently attempted suicide. His GP referred him to a psychologist.

On attending the psychologist's office, Nathan presents as well-groomed and calm. He says that he doesn't need to see a psychologist but made the appointment to "shut his parents up". Nathan lives with his parents, having returned to the family home after the breakup with his girlfriend. He last lived with them when he was 20. Nathan has a longstanding difficult relationship with his parents that typically flares up whenever he does something they disagree with. He finds it easier not to share information with them about his life in order to avoid conflict. He realised long ago that sharing only positive information helped them to feel proud of him. His parents are committed Catholics, and regularly state that if Nathan attended Church routinely, his life would improve.

The psychologist notes the comment in the GP referral about suicide risk being "medium" and asks Nathan directly about his suicidality. Nathan

divulges that he attempted suicide by hanging two weeks ago. He was disrupted during the attempt by his mother who became "quite hysterical". Her response had "brought him to his senses".

When prompted by the psychologist about why he attempted suicide, Nathan says he attempted suicide, it was not something he had planned. He had received a text from his ex-girlfriend accusing him of stalking her due to his repeated contact. She threatened to go to the police if he contacted her again. Nathan felt shocked. He believed he had been generous in forgiving her and expected she would be grateful. He anticipated they would be able to work things out. When faced with this, he recalls thinking that his life had reached rock bottom and he had nothing to live for. Nathan felt an overwhelming urge to die. He went to his parents' shed and found an old rope.

When asked about previous suicidality, Nathan adamantly states that he had never attempted suicide before or done anything deliberately to hurt himself. In fact, he had always shared his parents' belief that suicide was "a sin". Shaking his head, Nathan also commented that a 'real man' should be able to cope with life and not resort to suicide. The first time he thought about suicide was after receiving the text from his ex-girlfriend. At that moment, it felt like his world had ended and there was nothing to live for. Nathan feels confused and overwhelmed by the whole experience and has been trying not to think about it. However, every night since the attempt, Nathan has been having nightmares about it and has found it hard to sleep. This prompted him to attend the GP's office for something to help him sleep. As Nathan shared this experience, he did not maintain eye contact and at times became teary.

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When prompted to discuss other aspects of his life, Nathan reported that his work was unsteady. He had always enjoyed working in hospitality and found it a good way to meet people. Since the break-up, Nathan had lost motivation to seek out shifts and had not worked for several weeks. This not only meant he was living off his limited savings, but it also caused conflict with his parents who called him a "bludger" who just wanted to stay at home all day.

Nathan feels that the only person who understood him was his younger sister, Bethany. They had always been close and both experienced their parents' strict rules and expectations as smothering. Bethany was aware of Nathan's suicide attempt and has been the only person that he could talk about it with. He was too embarrassed to share his experiences with his mates, many of whom were also friends with his ex-girlfriend. Bethany had suggested that Nathan move in with her for a while but he did not want to burden her or affect her family, as she had a partner and two young children. He believed that he was not a good role model for them.

Nathan stated that he liked to go fishing with mates but had not been asked on trips lately. He was sure that they were all taking his ex-girlfriend's side and that she had been "bad-mouthing" him. He was relieved that at least they did not know about his suicide attempt.

When the psychologist asks about any current "thoughts or plans" about suicide, Nathan says that he was feeling haunted by his attempt. While he did not think he wanted to die, he also felt that he didn't trust himself. He shared that when he was a teenager he was always the one in a group to do

"risky stuff" such as drinking more than his mates or being the first to jump into a river without checking first. Nathan remarked that at the age of 30 he thought those days were behind him. He said that he felt like he did not know himself anymore...