

courage patience forgiveness acceptance

love gratitude faith

perseverance hope intention presence

compassion trust self-love kindness

spirituality purpose

The Suicide Midwife: Regeneration after attempted suicide

Presented by CC. Myers at the National Suicide Prevention Conference, 2014

Slide 1

I was 12 years old when I first witnessed someone in a suicidal crisis. I sat with them. I offered them my presence and empathy. And in my young, common sense way I guided them to safety.

That was 20 years ago and since then I have de-escalated a suicidal crisis in the middle of the street, in the smoking area of a psychiatric clinic, in a women's circle, over the phone, over Facebook, by the bedside of a friend and just maybe, through sharing my poetry about overcoming suicidality.

I guess you could say that suicide prevention is my life's calling and it is a long-awaited privilege to be a delegate at this inspiring conference.

But to experience a suicidal crisis myself? To survive my own suicide attempt? Now that has been the most painful and most empowering experience of my life, and is what brings me here today to present *The Suicide Midwife: Regeneration after attempted suicide*.

Slide 2

My name is Charlotte Claire Myers and I am a mental health activist, artist and consultant dedicated to improving mental health care and inspiring people to care for their mental health.

I run an independent, artistic activist project called *The Babyfacedassassin: Advocate for the Heart and Soul in Mental Health Care* and with my skills as a writer and my wisdom of the lived experience, I seek every opportunity to promote more heart and soul in self-determined mental health care.

My audience appreciates my activist spirit because I bring to the table discussion about psychological, emotional and spiritual challenges undefined by medical frameworks, and I believe in triumph over suffering.

I am also the publications officer for Neami National – an Australian-wide community mental health service. I prepare Neami's publications, tenders, online content and photography.

My self-published book, *The Babyfacedassassin's Rhymes for the Recently Dis-Eased*, is written for people who experience depression and suicidality, for attempt survivors and those wishing to understand them. Arnold Zable, a human rights advocate and highly acclaimed storyteller, states in the book's preface: Charlotte has transformed her own struggles into a gift of sharing ... in accepting and expressing it, so much is regained.'

Allow me to share an excerpt from *Chapter 5* called *The Undercover Carnie and the Woman of the Calm*, about a poignant moment with my nurse a few days after my attempt.

Slide 3

I'm sobbing almost in a fit
A Time Bomb has exploded
This unexpected mark I hit
Is snot and mucous loaded

For there she waits so patiently
I scratch a desperate grip
She keeps a close watch cautiously
So I'm safe from The Rip

That's tugging at me in the Now
To pull me back to Then
Repetitious tempting How
It could be staged again

On that thought I make a yelp
Sounding crystal clear
I activate the Ask for Help
Overwhelmed by Fear

And Help is there in form of stronghold
Hands upon my arm
Nurse Jemima, big and bold
A woman of the calm

'Help Jemima! I need help!'
The statement has a power
Certainly more hopeful
Than my tendency to cower

'I'm Here Colette, you're doing well
Allow the thoughts to pass
What you're feeling's natural
I promise it won't last'

Simplified and to the point
Her wisdom has its charm
Offered as one would anoint
A potent healing balm

Natural feelings? Doing well?
I'm starting to accept
That going through this crying spell
Does not mean I'm inept

But rather, it's the contrary
The proof is in the grip
Of Nurse Jemima's Empathy
Her arms around my hip

The penny's dropped to disengage
My tearfulness explosion
Thoughts begin to rearrange
What triggered this compulsion

To highlight all the evidence
That what I did was *wrong*
Forgetting it was consequence
Of sadness felt too long

I question what would be the use
Of living with Regret
Along with scars of self-abuse
Because of my mindset?

When Truth be told, I did survive
My Double Trouble Dare
With that alone I could revive
The crux of my Despair

And see it as an invitation
To begin again from scratch
Cancel every hesitation
Strike first light of match!

'Cause what I'm feeling's natural
According to my Voice
Improvement will be gradual
But now I've made the Choice

To meditate on my lament
With medicine that's free
The panacea of torment
Presence and Empathy

[Pause]

I take my time to roll away

From Nurse Jemima's hold
She asks if I will be okay
I say, 'I'm feeling old'

Matured by the learning
Of one important thing
That my flame is still burning
In spite of everything

Slide 4

Now I don't for a moment assume that people can turn their life around in one moment, with one choice and transcend all the suffering and complexity that leads people to suicide in the first place.

I wish my 10 year recovery journey could have been so simple.

After my attempt, my life became a typical 21st century mental health system consumer story: multiple diagnoses of depression, bipolar, psychosis and premenstrual dysphoric disorder;

multiple medications to follow suit,

multiple hospital admissions – sometimes staying for multiple months –

and multiple relationships with psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists.

Admittedly I was frequently unstable, fraught with depression, responding to drugs and medications like a text book such and such, and in the mix experienced a profound spiritual awakening.

Question marks circulated my wellbeing for many years. Despite the committed, well-meaning support of the mental health professionals around me, all roads lead to brain chemistry.

Because I am a woman, and because I am an artist, I was unsatisfied with my diagnoses and their prescriptive treatments. They did not resonate with the yearnings of my heart and soul. And it was the heaviness of my heart and soul that led me to suicide in the first place. I was very clearly, 'not coping'. And it was up to me, not science, to re-discover that which would make my heart and soul sing again.

Saint Augustine reminded me that: 'It is only in the face of death that the self is born.'

In facing my own death in a physical and egoic sense, my new identity as an attempt survivor echoed the miracle of birth – I was on the cusp of change.

Slide 5

The extraordinary transformative power of a confrontation with death has been noted by both ancient religions and modern psychologies. For a confrontation with one's personal death has the power to provide a massive shift in the way one lives in the world. Death acts as a catalyst that can move us from one stage of being to another one. The old sense of self must die and out of its ashes blooms a new identity .

It was this new identity, this new psycho-spiritual territory that I observed after my attempt, and the principle of nature's life-death-regenerative cycle that served me as a philosophy and a remedy for healing.

Surviving a suicide attempt is hands down the most uncanniest experience I know of, so I turned to Sigmund Freud's theory of The Uncanny and wrote an Honours thesis about it in relation to my attempt, to further understand the impact it had on my psyche.

Freud's essay, *The Uncanny*, performs both a psychoanalytic and aesthetic enquiry into the genesis of the uncanny. The Uncanny is a challenging phenomenon to grasp, because of its tendency to efface the distinction between reality and imagination. The uncanny provokes intellectual uncertainty and in its simplest definition, occurs when something *familiar* becomes *unfamiliar*.

It is this effect of the uncanny and the effacement of reality that compels us to invent new meaning in our lives.

The uncanny nature of surviving suicide points precisely to the attempt survivor's opportunity for regeneration. To regenerate means to be brought again into existence, to be reborn; to regrow in a new and improved form, and impart a new and more vigorous life.

You see, you are never the same person after attempting suicide. You are initiated – albeit in a destructive and traumatic way – into a new identity.

You are no longer distanced from or curious about suicide because it has been normalized by your own dance with it.

If we can begin to appreciate that an attempt survivor has been initiated into a new beginning and that this is an opportunity for them to rediscover their self and the most valuable essence of their life, then we are in tune with nature's way of regenerating life after destruction, and we are responding to their suicidal crisis with more grace and acceptance.

And who better to have in the presence of the new, but a midwife, who figuratively speaking, is a person who helps to bring something into being.

Slide 6

Slide 6

The Suicide Midwife represents my belief that even though I turned my back on life, life did not turn its back on me. She stands at the cusp of transformation, and trusts life's ability to regenerate life after destruction; YES, we need people to stand alongside attempt survivors who fundamentally trust life in this way.

The Suicide Midwife was *the me* who understood that despite the collective shame shrouding suicide and the resistance to view it in light of a transformative experience, I had the choice to re-focus on my health, my strengths and my ability to rebuild life.

A Suicide Midwife sees the value in *time and space* available in a safe setting to allow attempt survivors to process their attempt in an understanding environment, free of pressure and expectation.

A Suicide Midwife is not afraid to have conversations of the heart and will initiate dialogue about love and self-love, courage, gratitude, gentleness, compassion, patience and faith, to provide comfort and in companionship with an attempt survivor.

The Suicide Midwife is a role that I see a need for – whether metaphorically, in our attitudes or in our service delivery - if we are endeavouring to meet the needs of attempt survivors.

A Suicide Midwife may very well be a role best fit for a recovered attempt survivor.

Slide 7

5 Principles

There are 5 principles that underpin this approach to support that I describe as Suicide Midwifery. When I reflect on my growth from wanting to die, to wanting to live, these principles form the backbone of my life's regeneration:

Slide 8

1. Permission

Attempt survivors have a future ahead of them in the company of suicidal thoughts. It is something they learn to live with and overcome.

This was my greatest challenge and the way through was to give myself permission to contemplate suicide, and to become comfortable with that contemplation.

When I give myself this permission, I don't feel the tension between wanting to die and being alive, and I am alleviated of the pressure for having such challenging thoughts. Conversely, when I get angry or frustrated with myself for contemplating suicide, I am one step closer to attempting.

Giving oneself permission to feel suicidal means claiming the experience as one's own. It is acknowledging one's thoughts and feelings without judgment. One can then move towards loving and caring for their self while simultaneously feeling suicidal – which takes time to practice and master – but is the turning point in overcoming suicide.

Permission does not mean permitting action of the suicidal impulse. Permission means holding your self in your own heart as you sail the tumultuous seas of not wanting to live. Permission means acknowledging that you aren't coping or that you are having a difficult time, and that is acceptable.

Slide 9

2. Self-responsibility

It's the toughest lesson and yet the most empowering one. Accepting self-responsibility means you are willing to take the steps to respond to your self, to you own needs.

No one is spared the responsibility for their mental health – it's a commitment we all share and the more we exercise self-responsibility the more we inspire each other to courageously to do so too.

I believe that the reason I am alive today is because I decided to take charge of my mental health, to avoid blaming circumstances, other people or life itself. This empowerment has propelled me to move from strength to strength.

We shouldn't fear discussing self-responsibility. We need to be role modeling it for younger generations. Self-responsibility means speaking out, reaching for help, being courageous, demonstrating strength in our vulnerability and in doing so, we challenge stigma.

A self-responsible person is able to respond to themselves during a crisis and in the face of suicidal thinking, that is as much as we can hope for and expect of each other.

Slide 10

3. Community

As a community of suicide prevention we uphold the value of humans maintaining connection to overcome adversity. I know social connection is nothing new, and the theme of this conference, Many Communities, One Goal, points to the dire need for connection.

For the suicide attempter, feeling safe and held by companions walking alongside them is extremely valuable. I believe overcoming suicide goes hand in hand with building one's own community. Persevere until you find understanding, meaningful relationships. Stigma is always unwelcome.

Slide 11

4. Healing Qualities

We only need to draw from our own humanity to find remedies for suicidality.

Courage, patience, perseverance, acceptance, love, gratitude, faith, hope, intention, presence, compassion, trust, kindness and acceptance – these qualities are worth naming and putting to action for their potential to transform lives.

I put down my recovery as a result of self-love and kindness, not Valium or Epilem. I visited therapists driven by my courage, my perseverance and my faith. Nurse Jemima and her empathy are still with me.

It's the healing qualities invested in all of us that we need to hear more of in conversations about suicide, that will form the language of how we speak about it in a sensitive and empowering way.

Initiate conversations from the heart. I was never prescribed self-love in my treatment plan, yet it was self-love I was desperately longing for.

There is no end to the value and resourcefulness of healing qualities for day-to-day dealing with suicide. They are not new age, they are age-old human characteristics, and their beauty and longevity will see us through well after our relationships with psychiatrists and therapists.

And finally, if there is one element of this presentation that you take away with you today, allow it to be this.

It is the very quality that enables me to speak honestly and bravely about my beliefs and personal story.

It is the oft unspoken, powerful force that dissolves the aggressive impulsivity of suicide.

It will support us through compassionate, sensitive and challenging conversations that accommodate the many voices of the lived experience.

And it is the only way I have known how to overcome suicidal thinking, once and for all.

Slide 12

5. Gentleness

It is gentleness.

It is our ability to be gentle, with ourselves, with each other, with this challenge of the human condition.

I know it's nothing fancy or epiphanic, but if you were to ask me the secret my recovery and that which I still turn to when the suicidal me surfaces to voice her pain and difficulty in this world.

I meet her with gentleness and lovingly remind her that the miracle and maelstrom of life, is something we all can endure, with gentleness.

Thank you for your presence today.

My name is Charlotte Claire Myers, The Babyfacedassassin, advocate for the heart and soul in mental health care.

I look forward to meeting you personally throughout the conference.

I am extremely grateful for your own contributions to suicide prevention, as much as I am extremely grateful for this beautiful life.

courage patience forgiveness acceptance

love gratitude faith

perseverance hope intention presence

compassion trust self-love kindness

spirituality purpose

