

On being a student at a university hall of residence

It's been a Kiwi rite of passage for several generations for students to spend their first year in the company of 300 to 400 other 18-year olds in a university hall of residence. The upside of this experience is making lifelong friends and developing positive study and socialising habits. Families also see halls as a good transition for young people leaving home on their pathway to independence.

However, becoming a student may bring academic and personal stresses, from adjustment to independent academic work and the new social environment. The downside of halls, for some students, at least some of the time, is feeling overwhelmed with social anxiety and social pressures, loneliness and isolation, and some may become depressed and suicidal.

Recently there have been reports that students have been 'evicted' from halls following suicidal behaviour and claims that this has been done in a harsh, uncaring way. Some stories have come from students themselves. While there is courage in coming forward with stories such as these, the media can be a harmful environment for such personal, sensitive and complex discussions. It is preferable, and safer, for students to be supported to speak directly to the institutions concerned where they would be listened to, and where any change needed can be implemented.

The way these incidents have been presented in the media is concerning. Suicidal behaviours are, sadly, increasing in New Zealand, and sensational and frequent reporting may be contributing to this problem.

While there are no simple answers to the complex issue of suicide, we do know that suicidal people, in most cases, with support and care, can go on to lead happy, successful lives. Depression, hopelessness, loneliness and pain destroy our perspective on life and hinder our ability to solve these problems. At times we do need to intervene to save people from themselves—especially when their thinking is distorted and they are unable to take a lifesaving step. We see this every day in our counselling work. We know there is always a way through but not without help.

This brings us back to the claims that halls staff 'evict' suicidal students when they are at their most vulnerable. Halls are not therapeutic environments. For a vulnerable student recovering from a suicide attempt, going back into a hall may not be appropriate, or safe, given the social pressures, the emotionally triggering nature of intense hall relationships, and the reality that residents spend a lot of time alone in their room. If they return to a hall, students may very quickly become overwhelmed again. It is also unrealistic and unsafe to expect fellow 18-year old residents or hall staff to watch over and care for students who have made suicide attempts.

University services have clear practices about supporting students after a suicide attempt. Their approach is to deal with each situation on a case by case basis and to encourage students to take a break away from the hall (generally, to stay with family members) to recover their emotional wellbeing and to allow for a wellness plan to be developed.

The aftermath of a suicide attempt can be a high risk time. Good practice encourages a cautious approach, and involving the family/whanau in such a plan. Does a post-suicide care plan need to be negotiated compassionately and carefully with the student concerned? Of course, but they may not always agree with a particular course of action even if it is the safer one.

We also know that that fellow residents and staff can be traumatised and triggered by suicidal or serious intentional self-harm behaviour and they need support and time to recover from this. Nobody wins when we ignore the dual responsibilities of caring both for the suicidal person and the wider halls community. We don't have to take sides here. We simply need to be clear on what providing a safe and supportive environment looks like.

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