



How we deal with 'way out thoughts':

A living document

Ways of talking with young people about suicidal thoughts

by David Newman

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Abstract

In this paper, I describe some of the ways that I use the written word, in the form of 'living documents', to enable the sharing of stories and know-how about the ways young people deal with suicidal thoughts, or what are also termed 'way out thoughts' or 'die thoughts'. These explorations take place in my work with young people in a psychiatric unit. I share here an example of a one-to-one conversation and also describe how I collect and use stories in a group work or collective context. The young people I speak with have let me know that such conversations and shared documents are important to them.

Key words: *suicide, suicidal thoughts, young people, youth, living documents, therapeutic documents, collective documents, group work, narrative therapy*

I have been collecting living documents for many years now (see Newman, 2008). Recently, I have been developing living documents in response to the difficulties that young people and their families and friends contend with and share with me at the psychiatric unit where I work. One that has much relevance is the document 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"'. In this article, I write about some of the ways I use this document to collect stories about dealing with suicidal thoughts – what can also be termed 'way out thoughts' or 'die thoughts' – and suicidal experience. I share an example of how I collected a story in a one-to-one conversation and how I collect stories in a group work or collective context. The young people I speak with have let me know that such conversations or story collecting are important, as the following short account shows.

Talk about 'die thoughts', don't dance around them

Way out thoughts or die thoughts or suicidal thoughts have quite a presence at the psychiatric unit. I have heard many times from the young people that, although talking about suicidal thoughts can be intense, they want such conversations. Recently, I had this sentiment confirmed by some young people as they offered suggestions for the family and friends group I also run at the unit.

Each week similar questions arise for the family and friends who attend the group. Two questions that evoke what can be a harrowing, yet common, experience for family and friends of the young people in the unit are: *how can we deal with the terror of them ending their lives? What should we do if we are worried about them ending their lives?* I took these questions, along with others, to the young people in the unit and asked if they had any suggestions or responses they would like to offer the families and friends who come to the group. The young people offered many responses to the above question, but a common theme included wanting more talk about die thoughts. This response is representative:

It's a tricky one. Suicidal thoughts are not talked about enough. But talking about it is good. It's a taboo that no-one wants to touch on. I would say talk about it, don't dance around it. Support us. I like it when they say 'I feel you, it's hard.' My mum supports my emotions and doesn't brush it under the carpet, but it has taken some time to get there.

So I have been interested in finding ways to talk about die thoughts and collect stories of know-how about die thoughts, rather than 'dance around it'.

I will now outline some of the ways I collect these stories. First, I will share an example of collecting a story during a one-to-one conversation and then I will share an example of collecting a story in a group or more collective way. The living document 'How we deal with "way out" thoughts' is included next, then at the end, some principles that are emerging from my work with living documents are included.

One-to-one story collection

The following short transcript offers a way that I collect the stories more individually. Stuart was a young man staying at the unit. He was struggling with die thoughts. I asked him if we could speak about how he was going and perhaps specifically how he was going with the die thoughts. He agreed.

Not long into our conversation, Stuart re-stated that he was quite determined to end his life as soon as he left the unit. As living documents are double-storied documents, I was not concerned about documenting a story that might show how powerful die thoughts can be. There were stories of know-how sitting alongside and lifting the account of how hard it can be. Documenting how tough 'way out' thoughts can be was one intention for the conversation. I also held another purpose. This was to introduce a context in which Stuart could 'be for others' by contributing a story to a document that would be shared with other young people. And my guess was that he would find something different in his story in this context, rather than if he was more 'being for himself'. So with those two purposes as a starting point for our short conversation, we veered off in a direction that tentatively excavated some 'positives' in his life in terms of die thoughts, which was significant for Stuart as he said he 'didn't have many positives at the moment'.

A day or two prior to this conversation I negotiated with Stuart to leave the living document 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"' with him. I learnt from Stuart during this conversation that he hadn't read the document but I did not want him to feel any shame about that.

The short conversation we shared is as follows:

David: So, I did want to see how you were going with the wanting to die thoughts. Do you mind if we talk about them?

Stuart: No.

David: Okay. How are they going?

Stuart: Well, they are still there. I know I will end my life when I leave here.

David: You know, I think I gave you the 'How we deal with "way out thoughts"' document, the document that includes stories from young people who come here about how they deal with 'way out thoughts' or 'wanting to die thoughts' or 'suicidal thoughts'.

Stuart: Yeah you gave it to me.

David: It's fine if you didn't get a chance to read it. As you were talking just then I thought it could be useful to add some of your ideas to the document as it can be good for others to hear stories about how hard it can be too or how strong way out thoughts can get. But I don't mean to put pressure on you ...

Stuart: I could give it a go.

David: Well, maybe you could say a little about how tough it is. I know those wanting to die thoughts have been so strong. Is it okay if I write some of your ideas down to possibly add to the 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"' document? You can tell me what you think about adding something to the document when we have finished talking.

Stuart: Yeah that's okay ... Well, I feel alone in the world. I have nothing and nowhere to go to, no friends, no family. It seems that no-one understands and there's no-one to reach out to.

David: Right, it sounds so horrible ... I'm sad to hear that.

Stuart: I don't reach out now. I've stopped doing that.

David: Okay.

Stuart: I have heard people say to me 'you know, you should really try this ... or this'. But you know I don't think they can say that, as they haven't been through something like this.

David: Yeah, sure. You want people to offer ideas or solutions if they know something of how hard life can be, of how desperate you can get?

Stuart: Yes, otherwise people just don't know. And they can say things that can make you feel so much worse.

David: Could you say some more about how much worse you can feel?

Stuart: If I reach out and get disappointed with the response I can feel so much lower. It happens all the time.

This is so terrible as then I feel even more that there is nothing to live for.

David: Yes, that sounds terrible, Stuart ... You said before that you don't reach out now. It gives me a picture of you. I'll say the picture I get but feel free to disagree with me. I get the sense that by not reaching out you might be protecting yourself from feeling even lower than you already feel, or protecting yourself from feeling even more strongly that there is nothing to live for. I wonder what you think. I might be wrong.

Stuart: Yeah, that's probably right, I guess. I think I don't reach out anymore for a bit of spite too.

David: Oh right. I respect your honesty there Stuart. So not reaching out can be about protecting yourself from feeling even lower or feeling even more strongly that there is nothing to live for and for a bit of spite?

Stuart: Yeah.

David: I hope you don't mind me asking another question...

Stuart: No.

David: Is it possible then to say that you have mostly good intentions when you don't reach out?

Stuart: Yeah, I suppose. But I wish that people could be better to speak with. It feels like shit.

David: Yeah it's not good, huh ... Can I check, what's it like to think that you have positive intentions?

Stuart: Umm. It's good, as I don't have many positives at the moment.

David: I'm glad that you can find a positive amongst the heavy power of these wanting to die thoughts. And I appreciate you being open to this conversation we are having. Could I ask another thing? Tell me if that's too many questions.

Stuart: No go ahead.

David: Is it fair enough to say that you could be doing that protection thing deliberately?

Stuart: Yeah, I guess so.

David: What's that like to think? That you are doing something deliberately to protect yourself?

Stuart: It's a small success. I don't see it as a success at first glance but when I think about it in retrospect it is.

David: That's nice to hear, Stuart. I really appreciate your speaking with me about this tough topic. Is it okay if we finish there? Did you want to speak about anything else?

Stuart: No we can leave it there.

David: And is it okay if your words are donated to the document 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"'?

Stuart: Yes, that's okay.

David: Okay, I'll pull your words together now and show it to you later to see if you are happy with how I put it.

This is Stuart's story that was added to the living document. As I have shared this document at many groups and with many young people since Stuart and I spoke, his story has contributed to many.

Stuart's story: A small success

I can feel alone in the world. It can feel like there is nowhere for me to go to, no friends, no family. It seems that no-one understands and there's no-one to reach out to. Or when I reach out I can feel disappointed with the response and can feel even lower. All this can make me feel like there is nothing to live for. Now I mostly don't reach out. My intention is to protect myself from feeling even lower, as well as a little spite too. But mostly this is a positive intention. It is good to know I hold a positive intention because I don't have many positives. And if I'm protecting myself from feeling even lower it makes me think I'm doing something deliberately. That to me is a small success. I don't see it as a success at first glance but when I think about it in retrospect it is.

The living document

Below is the living document 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"' that I showed Stuart and that now includes his story.

How we deal with 'way out' thoughts

We are young people who have to deal with 'way out' thoughts. The following words offer just some of the ways that we do that.

Remembering our loved ones

Many of us thought about the fallout for others if we were to end our lives. And this can help us to continue on. One of us said:

I told my mum recently that I used to think about the end of my life and would ask myself 'what if I wasn't here? How would others react?' She started crying and said 'you know I wouldn't get over it in six months, I'd never get over it'. I thought not only would I fuck my life up, I thought about the ripple effect for friends and family too. I've had friends die from ODs and other reasons. It's awful. People don't get over it. You change people's lives forever. So I don't want people to feel that way.

Another comment was:

Sometimes you get to the point where you think, 'fuck, this is so hard, I'm doing all the right things but it's exactly the same'. I OD'd two weeks after my first six-week admission to a psychiatric unit. I used my dad's medication. Up until that day I had never seen him cry. I was lying on my hospital bed and I saw him crying. It was one of the hardest things I've been through. I think the main thing that stops me is thinking I can't do it to him. I just know it would be too hard for him.

Another of us said:

The other day I was talking to my dad and he told me about the death of my sister. She died in uterus and my mum had to give birth to her. My dad said she has never got over it. And he told me, 'your mum couldn't handle two dead children and I couldn't handle it either'. So remembering my loved ones helps me control suicidal thoughts.

One more of us said:

I had a close friend suicide when I was in year six and another one last year. Also my brother unintentionally OD'd two years ago. I saw how it affected my family, my community and me. I think I don't want to put people through that.

When I can't live for myself I live for my family

I can live for others too. When I can't live for myself I live for my family. Experiencing daily suicidal ideas can overshadow everything that the people who look after me have done. But looking back on every hard experience, I see that mum has been by my side. I look back on Christmas day last year, I was ready to die and I had a plan. I sat on the floor panicking and screaming and telling my mum to leave me, to leave the house, but she just wouldn't. I have a support system who have unconditional love for me despite everything I've

been through and put them through. To take my life would disrespect everything my mum and my family have done for me.

We deserve to live

I actually made a plan of how to do it and I tried to go through with it. When I tried to act on it I thought of my family. And when I thought some more about it I thought, 'it's other people and thoughts that are doing this to me'. Then I realised I *deserve* to live and so does everybody in this room. I truly believe that. We have thoughts and people who make us feel like garbage but we deserve to live. My grandma passed away a couple of years ago. It made me start questioning what there is to live for. But if I do end things and see her sooner rather than later I know she'd belt me.

I need to be with someone

I do have a list of people who I think about to stop me from doing anything. But when you're really bad it doesn't work. I know when I'm at my worst I don't connect with that. I think I need to be with someone, literally holding my hand. And often I don't need a deep and meaningful conversation. Silence can be important. I just need someone to be there. And I can be better the next day.

Thoughts can overtake the medications

Medication can help a little bit but it can be superficial because your thoughts overtake your meds. You can be put on stronger and stronger medications but there's only so far they go before the thought overtakes them again. And you can feel worse with medication. You can feel you are not in control of your life, that you are a slave to the medication.

Out of all unlikelihood we happen to be and we ought to try to enjoy it

There's a story about the earth and the sun and the universe that I use that helps me in tough times. I think of how we're all made of stardust in a sense, of how the sun and stars work in nuclear fusion. And I think of the chemical elements in this process and that the hydrogen is eventually used up in stars and stars explode. So the elements that make up our bodies had their origins in the death of a star, an exploding supernova. Then I think, out of all unlikelihood we happen to be and we ought to try and enjoy it.

I would miss out on the changes

I like to remind myself a lot of the things I'd miss out on. I'd miss my horse. I know he's reliant on me. And I'd miss, not just things like not being able to get married, but little things too, like if my favourite band releases a new album or stories that are sad. Even if they are not necessarily hopeful things, stories are always interesting. The world and stories are always changing and I would miss out on the changes.

Loving and truthful

When I'm thinking about things such as 'how easy would it be to jump off that cliff there?', I try to have a second thought that says 'what you are now thinking is absurd because it is neither loving nor truthful. It is not loving to end my life and it is untruthful to not deal with the causes of my thoughts'. That thought has saved me many times.

I know I don't have to be happy all the time

Suicidal thoughts come with weight. I can ascribe power to them or I can let them sit there. I know they'll happen, even frequently, but I can lighten them. Then I find I can go about my day. This doesn't always work but I also know that I don't have to be happy all the time.

People do care

Despair tries to tell me 'nobody cares'. I find it hard to say something back to despair. What I'd like to say back to it is 'people do care and they'd be hurt if I did anything'.

By that time, I'll have something else to live for

I was watching a TV show years ago and a kid died. My mum said 'I couldn't handle it if one of my kids died'. And I knew I couldn't do it to her. So I thought – and I know this gets a little dark – I'll have to wait until she dies before I end my life. However, I think by that time I'll have something else to live for ... And she's pressuring me so she can have grandchildren!

When I don't speak to people about the thoughts I can think they are true

Suicidal thoughts try to tell me 'they'd all be better off without you, you're a burden. If you leave the world they'd be sad but they would not have to worry anymore'. I know when I don't talk to anyone about what suicidal thoughts are trying to say, then they can become a delusion and I can think that what they say is true. In these times, I try to find someone who does love me to talk with. Yet my parents seem not very supportive so it can be hard to speak with them. They don't say they love me, yet I know they do. They just don't know how to express their feelings.

I surround myself with any type of love

When I get in that state I tell my mum, I go outside, I look at the moon. I surround myself in any type of love; family, friends or animals. I try and remove myself from the situation. And I think 'don't let it beat you'. I'm competitive; I don't want it to beat me.

I don't want someone to think 'what could I have done?'

I've thought about what would actually happen if someone close to me actually does it. I know I'd be constantly thinking

'what could I have done?' I don't want someone to experience that.

They may not sound like big dreams

In my head I'd like to have a life. I think it would be nice to have a job, a few hobbies, some nice friends, to be productive, to take pride in myself. They may not sound like big dreams, it might seem insignificant, but they're my dreams. What's helped me with these dreams – it's hard to put it in words – is my plan looking a little bit more realistic. The plan involves moving out to the country and starting a small farm; it involves a Saffron farm. The way out thoughts are still there when I think about the plan; they are offering a backup. They coexist with the plan but the plan takes precedence. The other thing that helps me not act on the way out thoughts is courtesy. I don't want others to experience the fallout. It's important for me to be a good person – I try to at least.

Am I willing to deal with the consequences?

I tend to ask myself 'am I willing to deal with the repercussions of my death?' And I realise I am not. This is helpful, as I know I care enough about others to not do it.

I'd be throwing away others' investment

I resonate with living for others. I think about my family, friends, partner, doctor and psychologist. They have been there, they have listened, they have clothed me, given me a house, provided schooling and so much more. They have invested in me. By throwing away my life I'd be throwing away an investment. I don't want to do that. What can help me now is my nursing. I remember having a chat with a nurse a few years ago when I was giving blood. I remember thinking at the time, 'what would I prefer, to die now and end up as worm food that wouldn't last long, or utilise the fact that I have a healthy body?' I want to utilise my healthy body and not to throw away such investment. I don't want to let the dark days take hold of me; I want to contribute by helping others.

I picture myself there

What keeps me going is imagining myself being happy, being content with life and having a family. It can be hard to remember that. I pretty much picture myself there. I know I'm a strong person and I think 'if I've gone through this much I'll get there'.

I couldn't help others with my own death

One of the things that keeps me here is thinking 'I wouldn't be there to help my friends and family to deal with my death'. I like to help others more than help myself. I would feel bad for not being able to help others in my own death.

Deliberately protecting myself by not reaching out

I can feel alone in the world. It can feel like there is nowhere for me to go to, no friends, no family. It seems that no-one understands and there's no-one to reach out to. Or when I reach out I can feel disappointed with the response and can feel even lower. All this can make me feel like there is nothing to live for. Now I mostly don't reach out. My intention is to protect myself from further hurt, as well as a little spite too. But mostly this is the positive intention of protecting myself. It is good to know I hold a positive intention because I don't have many positives. And if I'm protecting myself from further hurt it makes me think I'm doing something deliberately. That to me is a small success. I don't see it as a success at first glance but when I think about it in retrospect it is.

The instinct to live might come from the unknown of death

I guess it's human instinct to want to live. It's part of my genetics. The instinct might come from the unknown of death, of what happens after I die. I also feel like a lot of people have put time and effort into me getting better and I don't want to throw all their effort away.

He knew they would help keep me safe

I relate to the 'others do care' story. I have an older brother. He acts like a typical older brother and I often think he really isn't interested in me and my life and doesn't really care. The first time I wanted to kill myself I yelled at him about how I wanted to die. That was the first time he'd seen me have a breakdown. He showed that he cared even though he's that big brother and I often think he doesn't. He brought my cat and dog up to me because he knew they would help keep me safe while I was waiting for the ambulance. We're really close now because of this.

Collective story collection

I usually share the 'How we deal with the "way out thoughts"' document with young people in groups. Usually, we read it through, taking it in turns to read a paragraph if we are comfortable to do that. Then I ask the following questions that I write on the whiteboard:

- As we read the stories, what got sparked for you around how you deal with way out thoughts?
- What got sparked for you around how you might deal with way out thoughts?

The following two stories show this process. This first story was part of the document, read out amongst many. The second story came out of the discussion after the document was read in response to my questions.

'Am I willing to deal with the consequences?'

I tend to ask myself 'am I willing to deal with the repercussions of my death?' And I realise I am not. This is helpful, as I know I care enough about others to not do it.

I couldn't help others with my own death

One of the things that keeps me here is thinking, 'I wouldn't be there to help my friends and family to deal with my death'. I like to help others more than help myself. I would feel bad for not being able to help others in my own death.

Just last week I shared this living document with a young woman in the unit. I invited her to add a story if she was interested. Later on in the day I returned to my desk and sitting there was the document with her story, 'It's enough for now'. While in her room, she had meticulously handwritten the story on the last page under the final story. She had responded to the story 'When I can't live for myself I live for my family', not because this story resonated for her, but because this story *didn't* resonate for her. She said that she does not relate with this as she felt that people who care for her would understand the pain she was in and not blame her for her actions if she ended her life. She offered a different story, a story that found some shape by contrasting it with the story 'When I can't live for myself I live for my family'. Her story is the latest addition to the document. The process by which she elaborated such a story suggests one of the principles and considerations that are emerging for me in collecting living documents. These principles and considerations are outlined below:

- Finding one's story when a person recognises 'I don't do what is being offered in those stories'
- Finding one's story when a person recognises 'I also do what is being offered in those stories'
- Document the problem story, as this can shape trust that the stories in the document are born out of knowing how tough the territory can be. This also contributes to a double-storied document.
- When problems are overwhelming, an option is to invite the person to contribute to a living document so they can possibly build twin responsibilities: to 'be for others' as well as 'be for me'.

- When problems are overwhelming, an option is to invite someone to contribute to a living document so they can possibly build twin purposes: to 'make a contribution' as well as to 'get my point across'.
- If people are surprised that there is no 'teaching' in the 'handout', and they recognise that it is the language and stories of others who have walked a similar path, this surprise can build engagement with other's stories as well as their own.
- People can be less burdened if they do not have to speak as 'individuals', but rather as a group.
- People can be less burdened if they don't have to 'start' the conversation, rather it can be started by others' stories.
- Consider asking about the positive intentions behind an action, especially an action that is in danger of being categorised as a symptom of an illness.
- Consider asking about or noticing clues about the limits of the helpfulness of such actions.
- Ongoing crafting of living documents can be a way of responding to any dilemmas or difficulties that arise.

These principles or considerations offer guidance to me during some of the rough times in my work; especially with the stress and sadness about young people being captivated by die thoughts. Yet these considerations come out of a particular context. I imagine that if you were to try out something like 'living documents' in your particular context, either with die thoughts or some other theme, you would elaborate new principles and considerations. Such diversity in ways of doing this work can be enriching and energising. What can also be energising, as well as so very moving, are the documents themselves, richly evocative of how hard people are fighting to reclaim their lives.

Reference

- Newman, D. (2008). 'Rescuing the said from the saying of it': Living documentation in narrative therapy. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 2008, (3), 24–34.



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