Re-Energize & Re-Connect
Wellness Check
Workshop Series

A sample self-care toolkit for those who have experienced a suicidal crisis: an attempt, a loss, chronic suicidal thinking & more

A collaborative project from the American Association of Suicidology, A Voice at the Table and the AAS Impacted Family & Friends Division

Co-produced by Annemarie Matulis & Tracey Pacheco Medeiros

A special thank you to Dr. Phil Rodgers for his guidance, generosity of time and encouragement. I had so hoped to hand deliver a copy to him. With gratitude & love, Phil. You are missed.

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A brief introduction with a snippet of backstory
Thank you for downloading this sample toolkit. The exercises in this toolkit, and companion, informal, conversational coaching videos reflect a samples from a more comprehensive workshop series.

The original Re-Energize & Re-Connect workbook and peer-to-peer soul-care workshop series were developed in 2013-2014 for, and dedicated to, suicide attempt survivors further along the recovery and healing path. It quickly became obvious that the scope of those experiencing a suicidal crisis was much broader.

So, who are we? It’s a very broad stroke. Those who have attempted suicide, experience chronic suicidal thinking, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) and post-traumatic stress (PTSD); struggle with depression, severe anxiety and eating disorders that lead to suicidal behaviors; substance abuse issues and suicidal concerns; problem gambling and suicidal concerns; domestic violence and suicidal concerns. Farmers, first responders, military, veterans and the family and close friends left behind by a suicide death. And with that said, we know there are categories we have yet to identify.

In addition, in 2016, attempt survivors and loss survivors, also further long in recovery and healing, organically came together one night and completed the workshop together. And there we stay, together. We have learned so much about and from each other, and we continue a collective journey to improve the quality of our lives.

As an interactive workshop, the Re-Energize & Re-Connect offers wellness check exercises that can help clear the emotional clutter out. These sample exercises and coaching videos offer you an opportunity to gain a sense of how that works in a
face to face or even a webinar setting. If you have experienced any form of suicidal crisis then we hope you can benefit from this toolkit.
The following is the abstract submitted to the American Association of Suicidology’s 2020 Conference. It was accepted for a Thought Leader presentation:

Crossroad to Recovery: Different Voices, Blended Hearts

In this session, Annemarie Matulis and Vanessa McGann propose that it’s time to reconsider how we traditionally encourage suicide attempt and loss survivors to not only find their pathway to wellness but to increase their ability to improve the quality of their lives.

They further propose that we tear down the silos and, after an initial phase of their healing, bring suicide attempt survivors, loss survivors and impacted family to one common, communal space. This may be an uncomfortable conversation for some but is long overdue.

Using examples from the Re Energize and Re Connect curriculum as well as personal anecdotes, Annemarie and Vanessa will show how collaborations can help these groups gain insight to each other’s journeys in ways that are often described as “life changing.” These groups can collectively re-energize and re-charge their internal psychological, emotional and spiritual “batteries,” and then re-connect with living life fully.

The premise is simple: if barriers can be removed, isolating silos can be demolished, people can connect, and each person can improve the quality of their own life. This can then lead to a powerful force working together to save lives.

This “Thought Leader” session was presented on April 24, 2020 during the AAS Virtual 2020 conference. Annemarie Matulis serves as chair of the AAS Impacted Family & Friends Division. Vanessa L. McGann, Ph.D., serves as the chair of the AAS Loss Survivors Division.
So the instructions are simple.

1. We recommend that you match each exercise included in this sample toolkit with its companion video.
2. Watch the video first, then settle in with the exercise.
3. Simply follow the same process with each one.
4. Feel free to use whatever works best for you. I’m a handwritten type of person, but others prefer using their computer or tablet. In our face-to-face workshops, we use notebooks and pencils.

And don’t forget to keep breathing.

https://vimeo.com/309191240 R&R Coaching Video #1
https://vimeo.com/309193363 R&R Coaching Video #2
https://vimeo.com/309195626 R&R Coaching Video #3
https://vimeo.com/309197280 R&R Coaching Video #4

Password applies to all four videos: ImpactedFamily2020#

Annemarie Matulís & Tracey Pacheco Medeiros
I wish I had something like this when I was alone and struggling on the healing and recovery path after my last suicide attempt, a place I could go and sit with others who were also on this journey – not a therapy group, not a 12 Step program – just a place for a small get together to briefly connect and laugh or cry, exchange experiences, offer and receive support, and leave with hope...

A compilation of dozens of responses to evaluation forms from suicide attempt survivors

The exercises in this toolkit have been extracted from a comprehensive manual developed as a companion to the documentary, A Voice at the Table (2014). The contents have been evaluated and approved as evidence based. Equally important, these exercises have been completed and evaluated by suicide attempt and loss survivors further along their recovery and healing paths as helpful and effective via participation in face to face, peer2peer workshops. The companion conversational coaching videos are simply that – conversational, similar to the way a facilitator might open a face to face workshop.

Please note, the R & R was designed for those further along the recovery path. These exercises may not be appropriate for someone who is taking steps to recover from a recent suicidal crisis or loss of a loved one.
Re-Energize & Re-Connect Wellness Check Workshop Series (R&R): Different Voices, Blended Hearts – attempt & loss survivors together

There is an adage: *some things are best left unsaid, but too many things unsaid create a burden*. When the subject is suicide, things left unsaid can cost a life.

By the time the attempt survivor documentary *A Voice at the Table* debuted at the April 2014 Massachusetts Conference for Suicide Prevention, the American Association of Suicidology (AAS) had just announced the formation of its new Attempt Survivor/Lived Experience Division (ASLE). Voices were being heard. During the production of our film in 2013, it became apparent that some attempt survivors further removed from their last attempt and on the path of recovery and wellness would still benefit from an occasional gathering with other attempt survivors.

The concept for the Re-Energize & Re-Connect Attempt Survivor Workshop Program (now called the R&R) was born – a 2-hour, retreat-style wellness check. The decision to take this path was confirmed when the Massachusetts Department of Public Health issued a call for “new and innovative” support programs for suicide attempt survivors and loss survivors late in 2013. When our grant proposal was submitted, it included a companion curriculum for suicide loss survivors. The R&R is as far outside the box as one might go and still maintain evidence-based content. In 2016, the two separate workshops came together organically.
The original curriculum went through several revisions and a focus group. The first five-month pilot series for attempt survivors launched in August 2015 in Taunton, MA.

The Re-Energize & Re-Connect wellness check workshops are a common sense, resilience-based approach that instills a celebration of life. They embrace an action-based process utilizing multiple tools and incorporate protective factors while being creative, holistic, motivating and healing. This new and groundbreaking format fills a lethal gap in support resources for attempt and loss survivors.

The purpose of the R&R is to offer a safe haven for suicide attempt survivors and suicide loss survivors further along the recovery and healing path to come together and re-energize and re-charge their internal psychological, emotional and spiritual “batteries,” and then re-connect with living life fully. The R&R is about hope and improving quality of life.

By the end of the full workshop process, participants will:
(1) Recognize the need for continued self-care to maintain wellness;
(2) Re-vitalize their commitment to living life fully and improve quality of life;
(3) Develop new connections with other suicide attempt & loss survivors;
(4) Recognize the supportive value they can be to others who have similar experiences
Sample Toolkit

Dreams Matter aka

the Emotional Cost of Unfinished Symphonies

NOTE: This exercise is the icebreaker for both the Is This the Night: Finding Inner Peace and the Re-Energize & Re-Connect Wellness workshop series.

Please keep in mind that everything we do within our workshops and these exercises is related to suicide prevention and emotional, mental and spiritual healing – aka improving the quality of life. Please note – these workshops are not “counseling” or “clinical therapy” and not appropriate for someone still in crisis.

**Goals:** must always be reasonable, realistic and attainable

1. To inspire hope

2. To encourage support for others and end isolation

Dreams Backstory

A word or two about dreams as a workshop topic. Amazon.com has no less than 4,798 books with “dreams” in the title or the book is about dreams. Some incredibly wise people have written about the pros and cons of having dreams and/or following your dreams. It’s not the intent to try to “top” all of them but to
simply use “dreams” as a thread to discuss something much more important – our emotional well-being – our #SoulCare

For many, dreams offer hope.

But there is another side.

It would be easy to say that we all grew up with dreams as kids. Sadly, that’s not always true. Taking the risk to step out of our comfort zones, to follow our dreams, can become life changing.

Sir Paul McCartney, of the legendary rock group the Beatles, had a long-held dream to paint, but he put it off, in part because of self-doubt, in part due to lack of cheerleading support from others. After all, to the world, his gift and genius was obvious – his music.

However, at the age of 11, McCartney won an art award for drawing a church. And he and fellow Beatle John Lennon used to skip school to hang out in a local art gallery. In 2002, McCartney returned to that same gallery for his first art show, admitting that his art was not about proving anything to anyone, but rather because he simply liked to apply paint to a canvas. He followed his dream.

http://www.paulmccartney.com/arts

Many writing coaches will caution fledging authors to write because it’s the right thing for them to do. Do not write solely with the goal to be published and famous. On the flip side, all too often, people talk themselves out of writing because, “It’s too late.” or “I’m too old.”

These famous writers were not published until later in life:
• Laura Ingalls Wilder, “Little House on the Prairie,” mid-60’s
• Frank McCourt, “Angela’s Ashes,” 60’s
• Bram Stoker, “Dracula,” 50

Several others who sold millions of copies were in their 60’s and 70’s when first published. And today, an author doesn’t even have to struggle with the tangled web of “New York” publishing. Self-publishing has become more and more common.

But following dreams is not always about the result, the finished product. Sometimes is just as much about the courage to sit in front of that blank canvas and follow the encouragement and guidance of someone with lived experience to help you paint the canvas - or paint life itself.

Dreams can also become a series of unfinished symphonies…the things we leave undone throughout life.

*Gentle Reminder:* These workshops/exercises are not therapy. All activity is self-determined and self-directed.
Exercise

**Exercise:** You’ll want to have a notebook, computer, tablet on hand to do your exercises. Some examples of the “unfinished symphonies” might include not going to college, a trip to a particular location, pursuing a very different career, skydiving, writing, running for public office, a marathon, etc. These are the things we add to our “Wicked Awesome Wish List.” There is no right or wrong response.

At this point in a face to face workshop, facilitators would offer very brief examples from their own experiences.

Let’s take about 15 - 20 minutes to jot down a few things about your dreams. Remember, this is a safe environment. There is no judgment.

**Did you follow and fulfill your dream or is it an unfinished symphony?**

If “unfinished,” what were some of the barriers (real or imagined)?

In this moment, if there were no barriers, real or imagined, what would you still like to do (think “wicked awesome wish list” if that helps).
Take a 5-minute break

**Peer to peer Workshop Discussion:** 45 to 70 minutes.

Note: This is the process in a face-to-face workshop.

Each member has 5 minutes to share something about their dreams/unfinished symphonies and one thing from the “*If I could…wicked awesome wish list.*”

*At home on your own: Prepare a response as if you were at the table.*

If that dream/wish list item seems impossible – brainstorm for 4-5 minutes on how some version *is* possible.

*Compromise* is not a bad word…nor is *Alternative*…

*Simple alternative example: A Dream (Wicked Awesome Wish List):* To spend week’s exploring the Grand Canyon.
Alternative Option: purchase or borrow from library videos on exploring the Grand Canyon. Invite friends. Make popcorn…use fact sheets to educate yourself & others about the wonders & mysteries of the Canyon.

Discussion: The Facilitator will ask for a volunteer to begin and then just rotate around the table, keeping an eye on the time. Ideally everyone participates. However, if someone sincerely prefers to not participate, allow that person the freedom to make that choice.

Peer2Peer: Guide participants to refrain from cross talk or critiquing what others share. Respect and celebrate differences.

#Peer2Peer version

Steps for each participant:

1. Present an anecdote about a dream – followed or unfulfilled (no feedback)

2. Share one item from the Wicked Awesome Wish List (no feedback)

3. (Everyone) Briefly brainstorm on ways to achieve that goal. Remind participants to keep suggestions brief. Suggestions need to be positive and doable, not negative or criticisms.

4. This is about lighting the fire to jumpstart the energy and enthusiasm to continue to follow the dream. It is also about acknowledging that we all do/did have dreams and still can at any age. It is never too late. Each of us and our dreams do matter.
Facilitator: Alert everyone to the “5 minute” warning to end discussion.

NEXT STEPS:

1. Everyone is encouraged to select one thing that they can achieve before the next workshop. Such as, read a book they’ve put off forever, take steps to begin the dream or Wicked Awesome Wish List journey, begin walking/exercising 10 minutes every day, put paint brush to canvas…something to be able to say to themselves, “Yes, I can!”

   At home – do the same.

2. Post progress or lack of on the closed Facebook page. No judgment. (note: access to this site is via invitation & requires a Facebook account. Contact: director@avoiceatthetable.org)

Workshop Wrap-up

Go around the table and share one thing we don’t know about you.

At home? For this sample, what would you share with us if you were at the table?
Re-Energize & Re-Connect Retreat/Workshop

The 3 R’s of Anger

NOTE: This topic may extend into 2 or 3 more sessions to cover all exercises.

Please keep in mind that everything we do within these workshops is related to suicide prevention and emotional, mental and spiritual healing. Please note – these workshops are not “counseling” or “clinical therapy” and not appropriate for someone still in crisis.

Goals: (must always be reasonable, realistic and attainable)
1. To provide a safe environment to encourage and empower participants to share a part of their healing journey with others
2. To preserve dignity and counter stigma, shame and discrimination
3. To inspire hope

Backstory

“What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters, compared to what lies within us.”

~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Wise man, Emerson. And he had some inspiring friends to hang out with.

In New England, we hear the familiar preparation checklist whenever we brace for the winter blizzard or nor’easter and the hurricanes. Those who live in other parts of the country have alert warnings for tornadoes. Those who hope to keep us safe do their best to forewarn us as early as possible to avoid disasters.

The checklist concept is a well-used tool. Do I have what I need? How well am I doing? Is there something more I need to do?
Hopefully, if you are participating in this workshop, you have let go of two of the R’s of Anger – revenge and retaliation. Sadly, the deadliest of the three is resentment – the Score Card. The R’s of Anger are typically the direct result of someone not doing what we want them to do, the way we want them to do it, when we want them to do it.

**Example:** someone driving recklessly can threaten our safety. He/she is not driving the way we want them to and as a result, we may feel threatened. And we get angry. And shout things and make impolite gestures…and then we tell at least 100 people about, or better yet, go on social media and tell the world. And we continue to fan the flames of that fear and anger. That’s a textbook resentment. Some define it as “reliving a situation over and over.” Nothing good ever comes from that.

And let’s more clearly define the “Score Card.” The person who forgot your birthday, or the one who didn’t call you back, or the one who didn’t bring a gift…actually, I have a friend who calls it his “hit list.”

The good news is that many people honestly don’t get buried under resentments or the Score Card. But some do and it can create a very negative emotional life.
Exercise

Exercise:

So, taking a quick Wellness Self-Inventory check – How are you doing these days with resentments? Do you still have a Score Card?

Exercise 1: Use 10 minutes to jot down some honest thoughts.

Reflections:

You just have to get rid of so much baggage to be light enough to dance, to sing, to play. You don't have time to carry grudges; you don't have time to cling to the need to be right.

~ Anne Lamott

How did you achieve:

Freedom from anger?

Freedom from fear?

How do you stop those destructive emotions from taking over your life?

Exercise 2: Allow 20 minutes for input.

At Home – consider writing or perhaps recording your reflections.
Exercise

The S’s and the F’s (no, not that one!)

And while we’re here, let’s talk about another “S” word, STIGMA aka prejudice & discrimination

Do prejudice & discrimination around being a suicide attempt survivor, or any form of suicidal crisis and/or loss survivor still play a major role in your life? If not, why not?

Exercise 3: Allow 20 minutes for input.
At Home – consider writing or perhaps recording your reflections.

The Big “F” Word (and most difficult exercise)

Don Henley, co-founder of the Eagles wrote “…it’s about forgiveness” Let’s talk about forgiveness…

It would take a lifetime to read all that’s been written about forgiveness.

Now, about those examples of who and what might be on your Forgiveness List:

• YOU
• The loved one lost to suicide
• Clinicians – for not listening or hearing you
• Doctors – same as above
• Hospitals – same as above
• E.R personnel – same as above
• Other family members/friends – same as above and for dismissing the importance of the issue; lack of support
• God – or whatever you believe in; if you don’t have a spiritual reference, try “the universe, Karma, fate…or put it back to YOU.
Hopefully, if you, as someone who has experienced any form of suicidal crisis and/or suicide loss, have been in mainstream life and moved forward on your healing and recovery path, you may have already understood the importance of forgiveness to your life and well-being. But if you haven’t quite reached that place, this list may help to get you there. And as you continue in this journey to freedom and inner peace, you may stumble across a few more to add to the list.

**Exercise 4:** Allow **10 minutes** for everyone to reflect on the list and make some notes.

**At Home:** Do the same orally or in writing.

Take a 10 minute break.

_The road to enlightenment is long and difficult, and you should try not to forget snacks and magazines._

~ Anne Lamott, _Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith_

**Exercise 5:** Allow **20 minutes** for discussion on all 4 exercises

As with other sessions, this one may need to be extended to the next one or two to allow everyone a full hearing on their experiences.

**At Home:** It is very important to review your writing. Perhaps there’s someone you could ask to listen to you read your notes out loud. There is value in hearing yourself sharing these reflections.

**Wrap up – Gratitude:** Everyone shares one thing they are grateful for today. Leave on an upbeat, happy note!

**At Home:** reflect on your Gratitude List. Don’t have one? Try writing a brief one daily.
Re-Energize & Re-Connect Retreat/Workshop

Filling the Canvas & Filling the Canvas of Life

Please keep in mind that everything we do within these workshops is related to suicide prevention and emotional, mental and spiritual healing – improving the quality of life. Please note – these workshops are not “counseling” or “clinical therapy” and not appropriate for someone still in crisis.

Goals: (must always be reasonable, realistic and attainable)

1. To provide a safe environment to encourage and empower participants to share a part of their healing journey with others
2. To preserve dignity and counter stigma, shame and discrimination
3. To inspire hope

Backstory

As a young girl growing up in Boston, I had safe and easy access to the Museum of Fine Arts. I would spend an entire day there, two to three times a month, just wandering from room to room, floor to floor. I always wanted to paint – to create beautiful art.

The best I ever did was stick people.

Decades later, and well on my own path to healing, I read the story about Sir Paul McCartney and his never-ending journey with art. I bought some paint and in the course of a weekend created a Monet-style (very, very loose comparison) mural on my living room wall – tall blades of grass, blurred pastel flowers, a touch of blue sky… and I never let anyone see it, nor did I take any pictures, not even for myself.

It wasn’t half bad (I did not try to add any people). Three months later I repainted the wall to cover it. I’m glad I did it – painted the mural. I needed to know that I could. I needed that piece of my life canvas to be acknowledged not by the world, but by me.

Because, in reality, I write. And I love to write. And I teach. And I love teaching. And I train. And I love training. And I am totally at peace with my life’s canvas at this moment. And every once in a while, I pull out a blank canvas to have some fun – to throw some paint on it, brush it around and then ease back into my life’s canvas. We all need those blank canvases to grab occasionally. They add color to the bigger picture of life.

From the Clothesline of Tears to Hope, © 2013 Annemarie Matulis. All rights reserved.
**Gentle Reminder:** All activity is self-determined and self-directed. **Please note — these workshops are not “counseling” or “clinical therapy” and not appropriate for someone still in crisis.**

There will be a blank canvas, paints & brushes at each seat.

**AT HOME: If possible, stop in at your local craft store and pick up a blank canvas or two and some paint and brushes or Sharpies. If not, use what you have at home.**

“It's good to do uncomfortable things. It's weight training for life.”

~ Anne Lamott, *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*

During production of the documentary *A Voice at the Table*, we realized that we did not have time to further investigate the “turnaround to life” journey for each of the four attempt survivors. That’s another film to be made.

In its Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST), Living Works Education places a substantial emphasis on hearing the person at risk for suicide’s story as well as recognizing and acknowledging the “turning point” in that story — a turning point to life.

The **Turning Point** is defined as, “An emotionally charged moment when the life side of the person at risk first starts to speak and emerges from a feeling that their story of suicide has been heard. Signals that safety-for-now might be possible.” For loss survivors, that moment when they first smile or laugh or wake up feeling better…
Exercise

Workshop Discussion: 45 minutes, then a 10 minute break and then return to the discussion.

Each participant will have about 10 - 15 minutes to share some of the “bullet points” of his or her turning point or bumps and pot holes along the journey (potential barriers, setbacks, etc.). A gentle reminder that everything shared is in confidence and is not to be shared outside the workshop.

This sharing is the brush that paints your life canvas and is peppered with shades of what-did-you-do-when…????

AT HOME: your options are to write or record yourself or, perhaps grab someone in the house you can share this with or use Zoom or Facetime to talk with a friend. It is important to share this on paper or out loud.

Stop all discussion at least 10 minutes before the workshop is scheduled to end.

NOTE: If there are a larger number of participants, it may be difficult to include everyone in this round. Feel free to extend the completion of this exercise to the next R&R session.

It’s important to take time to step back and shake off the emotional heavy lifting of this topic that some participants might be feeling.

Ask each participant to share something that makes them instinctively smile.

At Home: Do this same action out loud or on writing.

Remind participants that they can touch base between now and the next workshop on the closed Facebook group (if it has been set up).

And if they feel the need, to use their notebooks to write about tonight’s experience.
Make sure to collect the canvases and paints, etc. They were visual props for this workshop but will be used in the next one.

At Home, now you can move to the final exercise that we do face to face:

Now is the time to fill in the blank canvas. Even if you only have one word, don’t leave the canvas blank.

Return the blank canvases, paints and Sharpies to the table.

This is the wrap up session. Conversation centers around what each participant learned about themselves. That discussion can be jumped started with any number of prompts. For example, “What surprised you?”

Another might be, “Share the insights you uncovered as you listened to (for attempt survivors) a loss survivor, and (for loss survivors) an attempt survivor.”

While the discussion is ongoing, encourage everyone to paint or (using Sharpies) draw, or write words that reflect “happiness” to them.

Examples: one participant painted her family, another drew a motorcycle on the road, in the bright sunlight, another wrote the names of people and places that make her feel really good.
References


“DBT: An Evidence-Based Treatment.” *Behavioral Tech ICal*, behavioraltech.org/research/.


King CA, Arango A, Kramer A, Busby D, Czyz E, Foster CE, Gillespie BW. Association of the Youth-Nominated Support Team Intervention for suicidal adolescents with 11-to 14-year


National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors


Resources:

www.avoiceatthetable.org

http://www.suicidology.org

http://wwaas365.org

https://www.suicideisdifferent.org/

http://livethroughthis.org

Embracing Imperfection: the healing journey of a suicide attempt survivor

If you or anyone you know is at risk and needs help, call:

1-800-273-8255 (TALK) Push 1 for veterans

https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Crisis Text Line: 741741

https://www.crisistextline.org/

www.afsp.org

https://www.thetrevorproject.org

https://www.translifeline.org/

For information about the full workshop series and/or train the trainer options, contact director@avoiceatthetable.org

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