A Novel Intervention for Treating Suicidal Patients

David A. Jobes has been teaching in the Department of Psychology for 29 years. He is the author of Managing Suicidal Risk: A Collaborative Approach, now in its second edition.

WHY: “I kind of backed my way into the study of suicide prevention and then became passionate about it. We’re saving lives, and that was irresistible to me. It became my life’s work.”

ABSTRACT: The typical treatment for suicidal patients includes a combination of hospitalization and drugs. But the traditional methods aren’t always effective because they try to treat an underlying condition — typically, depression — while paying scant attention to the “drivers,” the particular problems that are pushing a person toward suicide.

David Jobes has been a leader in developing a highly innovative model for treating suicidal patients, Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS), and is now the model for an equally effective digital avatar, a slightly cartoonish version of himself dubbed “Dr. Dave.” He was approached by a team of researchers from Seattle and signed on to their proposed project with enthusiasm. The team won a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health to build the avatar, which aims to hit what Jobes calls “that sweet spot” between the real and the unreal. “Dr. Dave” is lifelike enough to elicit recognition, but abstract enough to be nonthreatening.

Suicidal patients are much more comfortable with it,” says Jobes. “They feel much less judged, and much less shamed, and typically they’re more forthcoming and they disclose more.”

Jobes’s research could revolutionize the way suicidal patients are treated. Currently, if a suicidal person goes to a hospital emergency department, he will likely face a long wait while other, seemingly more urgent, cases are treated first. In the future, however, a nurse could invite the patient into a room or a cubicle and provide him or her with an iPad on which the avatar modeled after Jobes appears. “Hi, I’m Dr. Dave. I’m an avatar, but I’m based on a real person. This means I’m a virtual person created by doctors and researchers who have helped a lot of suicidal patients over the years. I’m a member of your care team and some people feel more comfortable talking to me first because I have all the time in the world, and I’ll never judge you.”

The road map that guides Dr. Dave and the CAMS intervention is the Suicide Status Form (SSF), a tool created at Catholic University.

“It’s a process that a clinician and patient engage in together,” explains Jobes. “It lets them see me as a guy with lots of ideas about how to approach the problems that they say put their lives in peril. That’s hope instilling, and hope is the magic ingredient. People kill themselves in the absence of hope.”

An innovative aspect of the CAMS model is the idea that patients are collaborators in their own treatment. The strategy of treating drivers, rather than underlying conditions, is also innovative. Pragmatic, specific interventions are recommended to target certain drivers. If a patient says, “I’m afraid I’ll lose my house,” for example, training in credit management might be recommended.

“What we can guarantee with CAMS is the best possible care, the best assessment, and the best suicide-specific intervention,” Jobes says. “We can’t guarantee the outcome, but our evidence is robust and patients like it. It’s a pretty radical departure from the traditional way things are done.”

PSYCHOLOGY

DAVID A. JOBES

Hi, I’m Dr. Dave.
WHEN PEOPLE WERE TALKING ABOUT THE POLICE, THEY WERE TALKING IN TERMS OF ‘US’ AND ‘THEM.’ A CORNERSTONE OF MY RESEARCH IS GETTING TO A PARADIGM OF ‘WE.’

WHY: I believe in communities, and even in communities that we call marginalized or disadvantaged, there is an amazing depth of vibrancy and humanity. But that’s not the narrative we are talking about in this country,” says Bartholomew. “How can we help communities struggling with poverty and crime? If we can reframe the picture of how police work in communities, we might be able to change what happens.”

ABSTRACT: Describing her many years providing social work services to inner-city communities in the greater Cleveland area, Jennifer Bartholomew says, “When people were talking about the police, they were talking in terms of ‘us’ and ‘them.’ A cornerstone of my research is getting to a paradigm of ‘we.’”

Bartholomew’s work looks at police officers as first social responders. When someone in the community calls for help, police officers are most often the first to respond. In addition to law enforcement responsibilities, what role does the officer play in situations involving domestic disturbance, endangered children, or mental health concerns?

The Police-Assisted Referral Program (PAR) created by Bartholomew’s team in partnership with the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) provides a method for public housing officers to connect violence-exposed families to a wide array of services. Once officers have completed the law enforcement requirement of a crisis situation, PAR allows them to offer a social work referral to the person or persons in need. Those who accept help are given a card with the words, “Help is on the way.” The card also has the officer’s name and a case number. Within 48 hours they are contacted by a social worker offering a confidential assessment that can lead to ongoing services.

“The card itself is not magic,” says Bartholomew. “What is changing people’s perceptions of police in their community is that extra few minutes the officer spends with them. The officer is saying, ‘Hey, I think you need more help than I can give you. I can refer you to a social worker.’ In that short dialogue, the officer demonstrates that he or she cares for that person or group of people and has their best interests at heart.”

Evidence collected between 2013 and 2016 shows that PAR works — almost 85% of people receiving referrals found the program helpful. The program was also successful in improving perceptions of police.

“In order for policing to work, people need to believe police are entitled to respect. To build legitimacy, police officers need to treat people with respect and dignity, allow them the opportunity to explain their side of the story during an encounter, be neutral and transparent in decision-making, and convey trustworthy motives. Giving officers the training and the ability to make referrals to social services allows them to improve legitimacy. That’s what changes the relationship from ‘us and them’ to ‘we.’”

In collaboration with her NCSSS colleagues, Bartholomew is continuing her research in some of Washington, D.C.’s at-risk neighborhoods. “I believe research must be communicated back to the community in a way that promotes knowledge and identifies next steps for change,” she says.

Devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe

Maria Thurber, R.A. 2017, double-majored in Spanish for international service and theology and religious studies. She is currently pursuing a master’s degree in library and information science at Catholic University.

WHY: A dual citizen of the United States and Ecuador, Thurber was raised with strong devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. “Growing up in Florida, I would wake up at 5 a.m. on Dec. 12 to attend Mass before sunrise and take part in the procession with mariachi music,” she said. “I have read about Hispanic devotions and Mexican devotions, but little has been written about the devotions of the Hispanic community in the United States.”

ABSTRACT: Working under the direction of theology instructor Tyler Sampson, Maria Thurber studied Church teachings and scholarly writings on Marian devotion and popular piety to try to understand the unique cultural expressions of devotion to Our Lady of Guadalupe. Along the way, she learned that Mexicans and Mexican-Americans have very high levels of devotion to the Mother of God. In parishes with multiple communities of Hispanic origin, Catholics from all Hispanic counties will often join in and adopt the devotion as their own.

“It’s similar to how on St. Patrick’s Day, everyone is Irish,” Thurber said. She was especially interested in learning how the Catholic Churches encourages and celebrates these forms of popular piety.

“The narrative of Our Lady of Guadalupe was so important for the Catholic Church’s early evangelization efforts in the Americas. Now with so much diversity, it is important to know how the Church is continuing to incorporate all these different devotions and themes.”