TURNING THE NEGATIVE RIPPLE OF SUICIDE INTO A POSITIVE RIPPLE OF SUPPORT

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The Ripple Effect is a technologically-innovative, digital intervention designed to reduce the stigma associated with suicide for males aged 30-64 years from Australia’s rural farming communities.

The Ripple Effect recognises that males in rural Australia, in comparison to males in the urban population, experience higher rates of suicide. This is despite similar levels of diagnosed mental health conditions in rural and urban areas. Contextual elements such as geographic isolation, traditional gender and cultural expectations, and close-knit communities with reduced anonymity, restrict open discussion about suicide and reinforce the effects of stigma.

The outcomes presented are the product of two years of engagement by the National Centre for Farmer Health—and collaborating partners—with rural and remote farming community members affected by suicide. This included those bereaved by suicide, those who have contemplated or attempted suicide, those who have cared for someone who has attempted suicide, and those who have been touched by suicide in other ways.

The Ripple Effect encourages participation from a strengths-based perspective working with, rather than against the normative behaviours present in Australian rural males (e.g. participation as a way of helping your farming community and presenting problems as solvable).

Primarily, the Ripple Effect aimed to understand how a digital intervention can affect self-stigma and perceived-stigma experienced by men in rural farming communities affected by suicide. Additionally, the Ripple Effect was designed to increase suicide literacy in the rural farming community and explore the relationship between change in self-stigma and perceived-stigma of suicide, suicide literacy, the nature of experience of suicide, age and health behaviour measures.

A combination of pre- and post-intervention survey questions (Stigma of Suicide Scale [SOSS] and Literacy of Suicide Scale [LOSS]) and qualitative data gathered throughout participation in www.therippleeffect.com.au. These elements were built into the development and delivery of a personalized, tailored website experience (combining shared stories, education, personal goal setting and links to resources) targeted to farming men, aged 30-64 years, affected by suicide.
Australia's rural farming community can be engaged to overcome suicide stigma.

During the research period, Australia’s rural farming community have been very willing to participate in the Ripple Effect as Steering Group members (17), Community Champions (60+), Stakeholders (466) and Participants (562 people from across Australia). Communication to the broader rural community was successfully facilitated through engagement with mainstream and social media and direct presentations to community.

People from all sections of Australia’s rural farming community are interested in reducing suicide stigma and preventing suicide.

Despite the Ripple Effect being designed for rural males, aged 30-64 years (26% of participants), there was significant engagement with females (65% of participants) and males outside of the target age (9%). In particular, 21% of Ripple Effect participants were younger than 30 years, suggesting a need for tailored online content targeted to this younger group.

‘Sharing my issues with friends helped me sort some of these problems out. Doctors and counsellors also made me aware that perhaps I’m a bit distressed and distraught and that this is very normal and that I was coping well’
- Male, 58 years

KEY OUTCOMES
The experience of suicide within the context of Australia’s rural farming community affects suicide literacy and suicide stigma.

Ripple Effect participants had a much higher level of suicide literacy than previous Australian general community samples. Ripple Effect participants had different patterns of suicide stigma when compared with previous Australian general community samples. Baseline comparisons highlighted increased perceived-stigma in Ripple Effect participants but weaker association between suicide and isolation and depression.

Changes in stigma and literacy were identified through participation in the Ripple Effect project.

Stigma reduction was identified through the digital storytelling process, through personal goal setting and via online postcard messaging. While previously validated in a sample of university students, the SOSS did not identify reductions in either perceived- or self-stigma among the target rural males, aged 30-64, or the broader adult rural population. Despite already high levels of suicide literacy in both target rural males and Ripple Effect participants in general, further improvement in suicide literacy was identified via pre- and post-intervention assessment using the Literacy of Suicide Scale.

Traditional methods of reducing stigma and methods of measuring stigma reduction may need adaption for the Australian farming community.

Suggestions for future research stem from the identified differences in suicide literacy and suicide stigma of Ripple Effect participants when compared with previous Australian community samples. Future research should consider:

- The significance of rurality and farming culture in shaping how stigma is understood, communicated, experienced and maintained in communities
- Stigma measurement tools that reflect and recognise the context of the rural farming community
- Suicide stigma in groups outside of the Ripple Effect target group—including, but not limited to—young people, males outside the target group, and females
- Further investigation into, and development of, ‘best practice’ stigma reduction material.