

## DISCUSSION PAPER: Independent vs Internal Lived Experience Perspectives

There has been a growing awareness over the past decade of the need for suicide prevention initiatives to be informed by the perspectives and insights of people with lived experience. This valuing of lived experience expertise is an unquestionably positive and necessary step forward in creating meaningful culture change. But it has also brought into focus concerns about what constitutes legitimate forms of this expertise. Organisations involved in suicide prevention initiatives are increasingly posing the question: 'Why is it necessary to engage independent lived experience consultants when we have internal staff members who identify as having lived experience able to tick the lived experience "box"?'

While internal staff can play a vital role in reducing stigma, raising awareness, and normalising the experiences of suicide within organisations, there are also a number of critical distinctions between engaging independent versus internal lived experience perspectives. These include:

1. External lived experience consultants can provide a richer representative perspective.

Independent experts have developed sophisticated skills in utilizing their lived experience with meaning and purpose and can bring a much broader representative perspective than their own direct experiences through many years of working with other people with lived experience.

2. Independent lived experience perspectives are valuable precisely because they are independent.

Professionals with lived experience are not always able to recognise the conflicts their professional obligations to the organisation create which can 'muddy the waters' when they are involved in internal projects. In other words, there's no taking an internal staff member's professional 'hat' on and off at will and replacing it with their lived experience one. There are also enormous benefits to involving an organisational 'outsider' who is free to speak openly and honestly in order to challenge the status quo.

3. Lived experience is not a homogenous category

It is important that suicide prevention initiatives include lived experience perspectives that are relevant and nuanced, rather than taking a one-size-fits all approach. This will often

mean it's necessary to meaningfully involve people whose lived experience intersects with, and often compounds, other aspects of a person's experiences. For example, an Aboriginal person who has experienced stigma and discrimination as a result of seeking help for a suicidal crisis will provide an invaluable perspective in service improvement initiatives; when designing a workplace wellbeing program, a person who has been unable to return to work as a result of the practical challenges associated with a family member dying by suicide could provide critical insights into how organisations could better support people who are bereaved.

### Opportunity for collective approaches

Independent lived experience perspectives and those of internal staff members are not mutually exclusive, however. External lived experience representatives are able to identify opportunities for internal staff to utilize their lived experience as part of an overall strategy of meaningful lived experience integration that is specifically tailored to the organisational context. For example, internal staff members who have a lived experience of suicide can offer unique insights when reviewing organisational policies and procedures or, supported through external skill development, provide peer support to colleagues in the workplace.

Before undertaking suicide prevention initiatives, it is necessary for organisations to first consider the relative merits of engaging an internal staff member versus an external lived experience representative. This can often be the difference between a genuinely lived experience informed initiative that has sustainable impact and one that does not go beyond merely ticking the lived experience box.

Collaborating with an external Lived Experience of suicide organisation with specialised skills and expertise in building capacity of people with lived experience, supporting organisations to integrate lived experience, and developing over time greater depth, breadth and sustainability of lived experience representation within an organisation will lead to a genuine Lived Experience Informed culture.