CHAPTER 6
PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

... [research] points to a need for family education on ways to meet the need of the bereaved child or young adult ... educational efforts should be directed toward destigmatising suicide, teaching healthy patterns of coping with grief, and mobilising support systems for children and young adults who are survivors of suicide ... (Demi & Howell, 1991:355)

This chapter deals with the programme development stage of the study. It primarily focuses on the description of a conceptual framework that was deducted from the situation analysis’ results (Chapters 4 and 5). Also, it describes the educational approach to the implementation of the developed psycho-educational programme.

6.1 THE NEED FOR SUICIDE SURVIVOR POSTVENTION PROGRAMMES

The literature control component of the situational analysis (see section 3.2.1) revealed a number of studies that have identified a critical need for suicide survivor postvention programmes. Ideally, these programmes will provide much needed psycho-education to adolescent suicide survivors and the social supporters (caregivers) of such survivors. The following quotations from some of these studies clearly illustrate this need:

“... educational efforts should be directed at helping people understand the destructive effects that suicide has on survivors and on their ability to interact positively with others. Education programs that discuss suicide without moralizing are also needed if the social stigma is to be removed from suicide survivors.” (Stillion & McDowell, 1996:232)

“... our findings also indicate a need for greater education about the problems of suicide survivors and the bereaved generally ... the professional community should direct its helping efforts towards a better understanding of the social barriers to survivors’ recovery and the intrapsychic and behavioural dynamics associated with these barriers ...” (Dunn & Morrish-Vidners, 1987-88:211)
“Given the large literature on suicide intervention and prevention and the comparatively small survivors literature, it is safe to say that guidelines for dealing with suicide survivors are even more uncertain. The implication is a clear need to educate caregivers about both suicide and suicide survivors ...” (McIntosh, 1987a:277).

6.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR A WEB-BASED PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME

A programme developer can focus on any one of a number of programme approaches and presentation styles in the development of a postvention programme. I have decided to primarily focus on a “psycho-education” programme approach, specifically with regards to the following four areas: Understanding suicide survivor experiences; destigmatising “silent” and “taboo” themes; pointing out effective and ineffective coping patterns; and empowering social supporters. Regarding the programme’s main presentation style, I have opted for a web-based approach, particularly due to the possibilities that e-learning technology offers. Some of these possibilities include its ability to reach large numbers of potential programme users and the relatively low-cost of programme delivery.

6.2.1 Programme focus: Psycho-education

The specific psycho-educational aspects that my suicide survivor postvention programme focus on, include the following:

- To correct misinformation and myths that suicide survivors and caregivers frequently hold with regards to suicide survivor experiences in the aftermath of a completed suicide. The corrected information may then facilitate the prevention of further complications in the mourning and healing processes;

- To provide a cognitive framework that can help suicide survivors and caregivers to feel less overwhelmed, out of control or helpless. The new insights and understanding may then facilitate more appropriate social and cognitive skills;
- To offer specific information that can facilitate appropriate and healthy mourning behaviour. Such information will promote a recognition of the physical, emotional, cognitive and social reactions that suicide survivors are likely to experience in many realms of life, including appropriate expectations regarding the duration and course of these reactions;
- To normalise and legitimise those aspects of survivor experiences that individuals erroneously may interpret as pathological, unacceptable, sinful, taboo or abnormal;
- To normalise the content, style and process of social support offered to suicide survivors by caregivers;
- To enhance the long-term quality of life for those living beyond the immediate traumatic impact and effects of a significant other’s completed suicide (Armstrong, 2003:227-228; Rando, 1993:375, 383).

6.2.2 Programme presentation: WebCT® learning management system

E-learning technology provides a high level of flexibility to meet the global educational needs and opportunities for specialised programmes. Technology makes it possible for individuals to access educational material that would otherwise have been impossible due to remote physical locations and socio-economic conditions. The available instructional technology has an immense potential to provide educational outcomes in innovative and creative ways (WebCT, 2004a:1-2; WebCT, 2004b:1).

WebCT® is a web-based learning management system that offers a variety of services to support educational endeavours at academic institutions. It offers programme and instructional designers a wide range of pedagogical tools, as well as autonomous course management options. As a result, it is very suitable for the presentation of online psycho-educational programmes. Programme and instructional designers are given the freedom to customise the structure, content and presentation of online programmes according to their unique needs and contexts (WebCT, 2004b:2, 4).
The presentation of an educational programme on WebCT\textsuperscript{®} enables programme and instructional designer to easily collect data on how programme users interact with the educational material (for example which pages of the programme were visited, when were the programme accessed and how much time were spend). This allows for the systematic evaluation of programme delivery and programme utilisation. Once a critical mass of online programme activity has taken place, programme and instructional designers will also be able to analyse and evaluate user activity patterns in order to improve the overall quality of the programme (WebCT, 2004a:3).

6.2.3 Programme content

The actual web-based programme can be viewed at the following web address: [http://webct.tut.ac.za](http://webct.tut.ac.za). A “WebCT ID” and “Password” are required to gain access to the psycho-educational programme’s web pages\footnote{A secure “WebCT ID” and “Password” was provided to the examiners of this thesis to allow them access to the developed web-based programme.}. Any interested party can request these at no cost from me at the following E-mail address: hoffmannwa@tut.ac.za. The decision to secure the psycho-educational programme with an “ID” and “Password” was based on issues regarding the protection of intellectual property and institutional policies regarding programme users (De Kock, n.d.).

The programme’s content consists of four main sections: “Stories”; “Experiences”; “Resources” and “About the author”.

**STORIES.** This section contains the edited narratives of suicide survivors that have experienced the completed suicide of a significant other. Different survivor-victim relations are covered by the various stories, for example daughter-mother, friend-friend and sister-brother relationships. The reasons for including the edited narratives in the programme content are twofold. Firstly, to allow those adolescent survivors who are programme users to identify with the experiences of other first-hand adolescent survivors.
This has the potential to partially meet their intense need to interact with other survivors who have themselves experienced the suicide of a loved one [see section 4.3.3 (ix) for this aspect of “Effective social support” during “Putting the pieces back together” post-suicide experiences]. Secondly, to provide some background information to programme users in order to contextualise the quotations from these survivor stories in the EXPERIENCES section.

**EXPERIENCES.** This section forms the largest part of the programme. It is based on the results presented in Chapter 4. The same experience clustering, categorisation and labelling are used in the programme and Chapter 4. It describes the emotions, thoughts and behaviours that adolescents experience in the course of “being a suicide survivor”. Each specific experience is presented in two distinct parts. Firstly, a number of quotations from diaries, poems or interviews are presented to illustrate the specific experience; the correspondent edited individual narratives are presented in the STORIES section. The presentation of direct quotes will allow those adolescent survivors who are programme users to identify with the experiences of other first-hand adolescent survivors. Secondly, theoretical information from journal articles, internet articles and books are provided for most of the specific experiences. The presentation of this information is aimed at meeting the specific psycho-educational aspects that have been identified for this postvention programme (see section 6.2.1), specifically with regards to the legitimisation and normalisation of those experiences. On the one hand, it serves to inform adolescent suicide survivors about the wide array of appropriate (“normal”) experiences in the aftermath of a suicide. On the other hand, it empowers social supporters (caregivers) with insight into survivor experiences that may ultimately result in appropriate and effective supportive behaviour. The theoretical information’s cited references are listed in a separate REFERENCE LIST. This will enable programme users that wishes to verify and access the information, to do so.

**RESOURCES.** This section provides additional information resources for suicide survivors and caregivers who may wish to read wider than the information provided for each specific experience in the EXPERIENCES section. Two kinds of information are
offered:
- SUGGESTIONS FOR SURVIVORS that provide a list of general guidelines to survivors on how to deal with the aftermath of a suicide; and
- A list of RECOMMENDED READING (books, journal articles, internet articles and internet websites) that I have found to contain valuable information on how to understand and deal with adolescent suicide survivors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR. This section briefly describes the researcher and author’s professional credentials. The main aim is to establish the integrity of the psycho-educational programme.

The following elements on the programme’s web pages facilitate the content’s visual presentation:
- A toned-down background image of an adolescent girl appears on each of the main web pages. This specific image has been chosen to visually capture the attention of adolescent programme users and to convey the message that “this web-based programme focuses on adolescents”;
- The various icons on the main web pages have been specifically chosen to project a contemporary and professional appearance to both adolescent and adult programme users. Each icon has been labelled with a descriptive title to enable easy recognition of the specific link’s theme, content and experience; and
- The web pages that present the specific experience themes within the same experience cluster have been developed on the same background pattern (template) in order to provide a visual cue to its similarity from closely related experiences. The page lengths of the specific experiences have been explicitly kept concise in order to limit programme users getting “bored” from having to read through long textual passages; the content and quotes on each specific experience’s web page provide the essential information without unnecessary “padding”.
6.2.4 Programme implementation and evaluation

The systematic implementation and evaluation of this psycho-educational programme does not form part of this thesis, but will be addressed in my post-doctoral research focus.

The next chapter will conclude this thesis.