

TRANSCRIPTS for Series 2, Episode 3: Building Cultural Understanding (airdate January 2020)

Intro

Welcome to *A World Where LivingWorks*, stories of science and survival bringing together our heads and our hearts to build a suicide safer world, talking openly about suicide is so important but we also recognize that listening to this series may bring up some tough emotions, if so please talk to a trusted family member, friend or local support service about how you are feeling.

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This podcast is brought to you by LivingWorks, a network of local suicide first aid trainers in your community and communities around the world visit livingworks.net to find out how you can play your part in suicide prevention.

Kim Borrowdale

You're listening to *A World Where LivingWorks* and I'm your host Kim Borrowdale.

First of all I'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the beautiful lands wherever you're listening, I'd also like to acknowledge everyone out there who has been impacted by suicide, the pain it can bring to our lives but also the desire to make positive change for all of us to live well.

Today I'm talking with Chukumeka (Chukes) Maxwell. Chukes is the founder of Action to Prevent Suicide CIC, a Devon based, non-profit dedicated to raising funds for community based programs focused on suicide prevention. Born in London to African and Caribbean parents Chukes family immigrated back to Nigeria in 1965 but he was then evacuated to the UK in 1967 as a refugee from Nubia from the civil war, he has also lived in Jamaica and Belize. Chukes has had a very eclectic working life from training in the hotel industry after school to opening an award winning delicatessen and later his own catering company, then retraining as a holistic deep tissue massage therapist and later as registered social worker. A part-time lecturer at the University of Plymouth Chukes now also a suicide prevention training specializing in LivingWorks programs ASIST and safeTALK. Warm welcome to you Chukes.

Chukumeka (Chukes) Maxwell

Good morning, and it is a warm welcome because it is your summer and my winter isn't it.

KB

It is, it is. Thank you so much for getting up early to talk to me today.

CM

No worries.

KB

So you've worn a lot of hats, well you wear a lot of hats, still currently when it comes to mental health and suicide prevention working with young people in schools, workplaces, community training, in the UK, but also around the world, and I think what our listeners would like to hear your thoughts on today how to best engage diverse communities in suicide prevention. So one of the projects you've worked on over the years was the delivering race equality in mental health care program aimed at tackling inequalities and improve mental health services for people from black and minority ethnic communities, would you mind telling us a bit about that work and your reflections since then.

CM

Yeah I think it's very similar to what we're experiencing in COVID actually because people from ethnic minorities as we are known in this country, just as in America, Native American's are seen as have suffered disproportionately with mental health and suicide and clearly as you've seen in this country people from black and Asian and minority ethnic, is a new phrase now, compared to what it was before, suffer more from corrosive mental health control and unfortunately well before George Floyd, people had actually died by being restrained in mental health services, so that came out in 2005 and after the case of a gentleman who died in custody called Ricky Bennett, the government decided to address the inequalities in mental health and look at the different race equality program and it was a very laudable but the reality to look at however, with the impact of where we are now, 10 years on or 15 years on, there is a very different energy in the country at the time and it was a political target but the political change didn't really manifest as best as it could as evidenced by all the demonstrations around the world with George Floyd. Still that problem is still there because people from black and ethnic minority cultures are still overrepresented in the criminal justice system, they're also overrepresented in the mental health system, when it comes to suicide now that data is not collected in the same way so we don't know, because the census stopped in 2010 to look at people who in mental health, so we worked at the community development level again, to try and give people the voice, so of times we were told it was racism and not mental health and our discussion and argument was that, actually racism does create mental ill health, just like racism could cause suicide ideation. So at one level it feels like we've come full circle in 2020 with COVID and Black Lives Matter movement to really address this again and I feel very strongly what we need is us, each culture takes responsibility with the support of the wider supposed culture because no one is really ever in the majority, even they think they are, we can address these things.

(5:17)

KB

When you talk about different cultures taking the lead in suicide prevention in their particular culture or community, what does that look like? I know we talked previously about the focus on peer support and peer workers and training our people from within communities to then train their community members, what is the benefit there in terms of building trust and rapport of the peer support from within your own cultural community?

CM:

Before you even get to that I think one of the things is that all the research shows no matter what you're working in terms of the health and in outcomes of people it's the quality and the power of the relationship, so when we start from that premise, it is really important to find people who already have that relationship, very often it might be a situations where the supposed experts comes into the area and says, oh we're going to teach you this or do this, that's good too but it definitely is important to empower people from within that, given community, not necessarily to indoctrinate them with our beliefs but given what we know, which might be a universal understanding, like with suicide there is a universal understanding will allow people to explain certain words that might not translate the same way or certain understandings of how there's a cultural belief which might be creates more of a problem or might be a solution, so I think that's very important to acknowledge and have that degree of humility when addressing people and for me it is great because it gives me the opportunity to, especially since lockdown and with the internet, I'm talking to you in Australia and I'm in England, I mean, so this has been happening a lot more like talk to people all over the world which I haven't really planned to do as such.

KB

What are some of the examples of people you've spoken to around the world in relation to the suicide prevention training in trying to better understand the cultural beliefs and behaviours and the underlying sense of trust and rapport, as you said, to understand where people are coming from?

CM

Yeah I think we have seen in the last years an explosion of mental ill health issues in society and we were just talking before we started weren't we, about we're burning the candle at both ends, language like that is really interesting and I was saying as well, Christmas time, we should really be slowing down but we're like getting faster, so it's really, really important I think to get knowledge how the circle of life or how different cultures if you like and I think for me, we've almost got our Western disease of busyness and that can go really intense into other cultures which are made to feel like they have to serve the busyness of the minority of the people who control business and everything else, you know, so for me lockdown has given me some massive opportunity to, even with the suffering, to look at life again and do we really want to be on this hamster wheel.

So in many cultures you flow, in Aboriginal cultures, when I say Aboriginal I don't just mean Australian Aboriginal, I'm talking about universal Aboriginal around the planet, many cultures flow with a season, with the times, which is very counterintuitive to a very industrialized, we've got to get this done, get crops in quickly all of that society and it's made us all slaves at one level and it's like we don't recognize that so and then as a black person you might have to scream louder because you've already got that in your legacy but I think there's now an awakening in humanity now that can feel that we need to change and so that also makes us recognize universality and our togetherness and even though we might have separate beliefs, I remember bringing home an Aboriginal lady to Stonehenge in England from Australia, she could tell me exactly what Stonehenge was from that universal understanding, I was like blown away, so that is the thing, yes with the internet we're very close together but actually we're much closer together at times, so sometimes the cultural beliefs have come about by a small minority of powerful people separating people into belief systems rather than acknowledging a belief system and when you're seemingly up against this big system that you can't seem to change, you might lose faith, you might lose hope, and then just go, I just want to go, I just want to leave. So this I think is something we need to highlight when we're working across cultures to understand historically where some nations or some countries that have been but also where we'd all could go and are going.

KB

Absolutely and taking the time to understand that because it takes time and conversation and trust right?

CM

Yeah definitely.

KB

Are there any examples you can share in relation to how you've actually worked to build that trust and sense of rapport with people of either some similar backgrounds to yourself or different cultures, so I know that you were talking to me about some work that you've done with Nigeria and Jamaica, Belize.

(10:15)

CM

So what I've done, and this is really due to LivingWorks actually, I've managed to go out to the Summit back in Atlanta years ago where I met trainers from all over the world and I suddenly realized how big the scale of suicide was in the world and then last year, I think, yes I was in Derry for the International Suicide Prevention Alliance, and so what I've managed to reflect on is, is some of the countries I've lived in or some of the issues that happen in my life which on one level seem traumatic and they were at the time, for me linking in with Nigeria is more like a healing for me as well because of the civil war, so that story is an interesting story because I came over to, as I said, to Atlanta, the LivingWorks Summit, and then I was staying with a friend in upstate New York and he was a Buddhist and we were going to go the Karma (UNCLEAR – 11:09) temple, Karma is one of the top Buddhist teachers and there was a temple just outside Woodstock, so we drove all the way to Woodstock to find this temple and deliver a tour from the Buddha of this age, he gives healing tools a bit like these healing

tools, it's called a (UNCLEAR – 11:24) so we went to deliver that, as I came out I think I was wearing a suicide prevention t-shirt and this chap said to me, wow suicide prevention, I know a person in Nigeria who is really into suicide prevention and he's a psychiatrist, I'll introduce you he's called (UNCLEAR – 11:39) and so he introduced me and got WhatsApp and emails and then he introduced me to someone called Victor Hugo and even though we haven't actually managed to pull off anything yet, he's in an organization called Mentally Aware Nigeria an initiative who is one of the biggest youth and mental health organizations in Nigeria.

So we've talked tentatively, just before lockdown as well, about rolling out suicide prevention in Nigeria. So what my aspiration is with Nigeria and other places is to, first before there were no START's so the online courses to initially start with START and then to take some qualified trainers to go to Nigeria or to go to different countries and train people in safeTALK, and as they have trained in safeTALK, I was actually talking to somebody the other day who did something in Hungry and she said to me, that rather than do safeTALK we went in with ASIST we might review that, and then you get the best people who really loved it and worked with it for maybe up to a year or so and they can go back and train the local people because then that is where the essence really takes place.

If you think about this, it's taken me already two and a half, three years just having certain phone calls, certain WhatsApp messages, certain LinkedIn, certain things I've been invited in, so I don't see so much as working for or trying to promote, it's almost like a network of friendship which then enables us to respond to do the work. Suddenly, it's almost like magic happens, you know, I think of a country, I think I said to you we've employed some interns and suddenly I've got interns from Portugal, Tanzania, Romania, and these are countries that are now starting to have conversations and all of a sudden those countries have got connections, family – Jamaica, Nigeria, so this feels like a really appropriate way, rather than just go on holiday to sun myself, to really go back and perform a service to help with suicide and again one more thing, is that in Nigeria suicide is still an illegal act, like it was in this country. So the way in which we approach that and the way in which the people are starting to approach that a government is to decriminalize that and also to really can compassionately care for people who are struggling.

KB

And that would be really interesting as to how the language that you use and how you frame the training if it's come from being that illegal act and you still will be working through all of those beliefs and behaviours and attitudes to turn that around into compassionate care. But how cool is that that you go from Buddhist temple near Woodstock, wearing a suicide prevention t-shirt, run into someone who knows someone from Nigeria who is working in the same space and now be in a position where you can actually be talking about doing this in practice, it's just amazing.

CM

Yeah, yeah, yeah one little trick is my name Chukumeka means 'thank God' and so for me, I do believe in God and it's not just a big guy in the sky with a white beard, it's more that energy that moves us all and the more I let go the better it gets, the more I think I'm in control the worse it gets and I mean that in a jovial but also in a real way because before COVID I wrote this incredible business plan and then COVID happened, so we've had to turn around some and let go and being still, things have happened, so I do think things happen through us rather than me taking it on at times and so it's like that and when I look back I start to see how it's happened but it's almost like you wouldn't believe it, you know, it's even like meeting you or anyone it's just really quite nice because before you called me I was literally just having these calls about different cultures, you know whereas I only had Nigeria and Jamaica on my mind before maybe Tanzania and Kenya but all of these things happening.

(15:26)

KB

Not thinking that you'd be off to Hungry and Romania and wherever else you've got connections.

CM

Yeah and what nice is about it and literally the woman I'm talking to in Romania said to me, ah again this is how this happened so, I think I shared with you how I came to another organization and then she was like, I want to do this in Romania, I just recruited an intern to work with and I said to them work with and not work for me because I don't like that idea but work with me and then I met this doorman from Romania and then even last night a friend of mine writes on Facebook, my wife and I are going to build an eco-house in Romania and we're offering our [house] so I said, oh I just...I've been speaking to this lady about suicide prevention in Romania, all this has happened within two weeks and then again what we have to acknowledge is Romania was a communist country, we have dictators, the church that is still orthodoxically powerful, so all these things are the cultural understands that we have to understand how we get in and breakdown the stigma and the taboo that has been in there for many, many years.

KB

What a coincidence to have the eco-house that could lead you into that world, that's fantastic.

CM

(UNCLEAR – 16:39) so suddenly the connections and we were just saying, we have created an association, so we're going to simply call it again Suicide Safer Romania and just go for it

KB

Beautiful. I love that you could write your business plan ahead of COVID that basically ends up scrap paper but you're doing all of these things that just come to you through more connection actually ironically enough through COVID, connecting with different people in different ways and all of these things coming together at a time that seems right for those different countries, different communities and conversations, it's great. So I love that we can reinforce to our listeners, the importance of community lead suicide prevention and really understanding the history, training up local people to be doing training, really being guided by that context but what about mental health professionals who maybe around people of different cultures.

CM

So one of the things I mean we have a lot of growth in speak around compassion now in mental health, here in social work, so when you think back again in Aboriginal cultures, sitting around the fire, talking, sharing stories, community healing rather than the one individual that is coming in to do the healing, the spirits are open in Africa where the people gather around the person and sing to the person, I'm not saying this is all perfect but again in the West or within spiritual understanding that Christ consciousness, that Buddha nature, that energy of being kind, I think it's needed across the whole system because if we think mental health firstly as separate to physical health, [clears throat] that's not too good and so we have this specialist mental health service which we might not actually be looking at a holistic person, so I've always said in my understanding, everything comes from the mind, so if you look at the teachings of Buddha, of Jesus, and even the Buddha of this age now, we'll always talk about purifying our minds, purifying our thoughts. So if I come in as a professional and say, this person has depression, that might be true however, if there is no word for depression as there are in some cultures what do you call it, some cultures have told and this is a good point for us Westerners thinking too much, so again you know, or talking too much or pain in my heart, because these things are lifestyle choices which we all have and we all make, so sometimes I think the people in these professions need it more than the people in community, it's almost like that through preventative medicine and through the internet through understanding and the mantra that we use in LivingWorks don't we, is that or in the suicide prevention world is, suicide prevention is everybody's business but let's take out the word business, I would like to think responsibility and I'm going to change that really and thinking and talking to you because it's the ability to respond and you don't need an ology to respond from your heart but it's really hard to be in your heart all the

time and that's what suicide prevention has enabled me to start to understand because I don't know when the phone is going to ring and somebody is really upset and I'm not a crisis line but I can respond or not. So for me the challenge is how we don't move to a professionalized suicide prevention but we really acknowledge as the founders of LivingWorks and many other people that this can be done by anybody but we have to take notice and COVID has shown us as well, you are not fully doing this now, I have to really work hard to understand some of the causes of why people want to take their life, so if you are hungry we need to feed them, all these things of kindness which should be in the state but it's these realities now that we need to look at as well, so the mental health worker is part of that because they could be burnt out, they could be struggling with their own thoughts of suicide, they could have all this but they're supposed to be a professional, so for me I like to look at it, we're all suffering to a certain degree but it doesn't have to be that way, so try and treat everyone and it sounds quite quaint and stuff but I try to treat people the same in terms of knowing potentially anyone could have those thoughts of not want to be here, so I think of friendliness and I think there is a real pressure on oneself to manage that in oneself you know and help each other, so I think the mental health profession needs that support to let go over here, you might have heard of something called Open Dialogue, that comes from Finland, which is a way of working and I think if we can work on that more in a more sort of community circles of support reality we'll have all these circles of support and networks around the world and in our communities and people feel safe to respond rather than thinking they have to just send them to a hospital or be locked up, I think that was a bit of a roundabout way of me saying, we need to look after each other as well, whether we're in the mental health system or not.

(21:28)

KB

We totally do, I think also, this is what this series is about creating a better cultural understanding and I guess realizing that suicide is a complex human behaviour and we all bring into every interaction what our context is whether it's mental health professionals and others alike, we are all just human beings with, as you say, with a degree of our own suffering that we bring into every interaction.

In every episode I've asked people what gives them hope when they look at suicide and it's prevention, because it's a tough area to be working in, it's very personal as you say and people are going through tough times, so what gives you hope when you think about the work that you are doing and suicide.

CM

So, you might have heard me say a couple of times, or elude to a couple of times, that the pillar of this age is on the planet and externalizing and so for me it goes one part of my life where I was a probationary Christian Buddhist Monk and so it's not a religious thing, even though one would say religion, well, isn't it, Buddhist and Christianity, no when the avatar comes forth in humanity that becomes an incredible opportunity for us all and what's been interesting over the last few years is that the Buddha has been talking about suicide and so what that has done is suddenly governments and suddenly places have woken up to this reality and he's still high on up on the list of a million people a year, and what's happening with COVID but if you think about something like how many people die of heart disease, so for me what gives me hope is as we heal our hearts, as we really know that we can do this and that's many things you know and we lose the worry because that's what really gets in the way for me, like the phone goes and a mother is there worrying, we spend more of our time talking and sharing, so that the mother feels calm because I've always say that worry is being, not that I've always said but I've understood it, worry is like a virus, so you imagine what you just said there, can hope be a virus and a virus in a positive sense, so for me I've also, I'm doing a project later on which is called Beyond Hope Life and that's why I like life because LivingWorks, so living works, whereas before I came into suicide prevention and I spent most of my life, I've been quite sad, quite miserable, and I'm like, I know dying works but living works is really important and so that's what gives me hope and seeing the amount of people that are slowly waking up to be able to help and support, so it feels really positive, now whether I personally are going to be there or a big

organization, not sure, but it's more about the connections and the relationships that always give us the opportunity to share what I've just shared with you about Buddha being on the planet but also the healing tools and the way in which collective consciousness is going to move us away from being more Trump like, to maybe more Biden like, so oh happy day, that is what gives me hope.

KB

Hahaha, that's great, well what gives me hope is hearing about all these beautiful connections that you're making around the world with different communities and cultures it's just so inspiring to hear about that and I know that you've got a lot of different ideas and projects that you're working on where can people find out more about the work that you do and what would you like to tell us a bit more about.

(24:39)

CM

So we've got a aspiration to have a retreat, a centre based on befriending, we have a place in England called Maître and Maître is like a suicide place where people who are feeling suicidal can go and be befriended, so we're looking to have that on a farm, so we set up a charity called Good Within Action To Prevent Suicide and it's in it's early stages, we've got an idea for a farm that we would like to buy and then on that farm as well, we want to be sort of have sustainable living as well, good food and even people to fast and people to eat well to regenerate themselves because again that's the other thing, regenerative medicine is really, really important for our hope in the future and then also our activity with Action To Prevent Suicide so www.actiontopreventsuicide.org you can look, so we're trying to have categories of workers in community, young people, workplaces, and international, so those are just the way in which we sort of divide the work up but it really is one big community and so it's just trying to respond, we've just recently been given some funds to look specifically and work with (UNCLEAR – 25:40) as well as LGBTQ people and then some other funds to work with bereaved young people to suicide, we well as the project I was saying, Beyond Hope life and that site is for people who have been bereaved by suicide and that's where you can put them in more of people who have been bereaved by suicide and has something on their website and so we're hoping to spread that through other countries and relationships that I've built up through LivingWorks people actually, so hopefully these are some of the projects, I've got everything in my mind is always in god's own time not Chukumeka's time so patience is the virtue that I sometimes struggle with, when you look back actually when I've been patient it's happened really quick, whilst you're waiting, whilst you're trying, it doesn't feel like it, so for me it's patience and to really recognize that things are moving in the right direction, even though you might not know exactly what is going to happen next.

(26:32)

KB

I think that is a lesson that I and many of the listeners could definitely take to heart even if you look at what's happened this year, you know, I can't wait to get to the end of this year and as you said right at the start of this interview, burning the candle at both ends, everyone's exhausted, but actually look at how many things have also been achieved this year and how quickly the year has gone, so I love that, being patient but also recognizing that once you do actually get to the stage of that achievement looking back and thinking how fast that happened is amazing and maybe your friends in Romania who are building the eco-house could help you on the farm that would be a beautiful full circle.

CM

That would be great, it's funny actually because all of this does come out of a place I used to inhabit in the southwest here, so many relationships have come out of that, again it's the same as when you look back and

see, oh I was there and I met that person, it's just like a miracle each time, it's the miracle of life really, it's awesome, as they say in the States.

KB

Awesome.

Well it's been awesome talking to you Chukes, thank you so much for your time and for the reflections and insights that you've shared with us today and good luck with all of your projects and coming into the new year.

CM

Thank you

Ending

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