

TRANSCRIPT for Series 3, Episode 5: Let's Talk About Trainers

Introduction

Welcome to *A World Where LivingWorks*, stories of science and survival. Bringing together our heads and our hearts, to build a suicide safer world.

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

First, I'd like to acknowledge 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 brings to our lives, but also the desire to make positive change, for all of us to live well.

Today I'm talking again with Richard Ramsay, co-founder of LivingWorks.

This is the fifth episode in season three of *A World Where LivingWorks*, a season focused on learning about the history and evolution of their ground-breaking suicide first aid training practices, now being taught around the world.

We know LivingWorks today as a global leader in suicide intervention. Thousands of trainers in workplaces and communities around the world teaching gold class suicide first aid programs like the two-day ASIST workshop, the half day safeTALK suicide alert helper workshop and now the 90- minute online interactive introduction to suicide first aid, LivingWorks Start. Programs that have been endorsed in more than 50 peer reviewed journals around the world. That have informed international policy and is implemented everywhere from schools to military bases, hospitals to sports clubs and everything in between.

In the last episode we talked about the evidence behind that LivingWorks program. In this episode we get to the heart of LivingWorks, the people, the thousands of trainers in communities and workplaces around the world who are helping millions upskill in suicide first aid.

Hello again Richard

Richard Ramsay, guest: Hello Kim, great to be back talking with you.

KB: How did the trainer model come about, because I think that's quite interesting because when you started doing that, train the trainer models that it's lead by the people in their own communities and settings, how did that come about because that probably wasn't happening a lot in this environment before you started that?

RR: Well there was probably maybe two reason; we identified two problems in the original research that was being done, one was, what can we do that would help to reduce the rates of suicide or the impact of actual suicide on people and their communities and the other side of that was what can we do to improve the confidence or the training of those who are helpers, so they won't be afraid to reach out to somebody, we had the two challenges.

Then when we got introduced to a, what ended up being called a social R&D model or a method, which was an adaptation from industrial R&D that a professor had done in Michigan some years earlier, they had a model that allowed you to go from researching the literature to designing a training curriculum, to doing pilot tests and field trials on a bigger audience and then eventually to put it altogether into some kind of manual type of

learning and then if it all works, then to have large scale dissemination. So, when we got to that particular kind of question of how in the hell are we going to get this to a large-scale dissemination because there is just four of us and even though it might be exotic to fly around the world for a while

KB: Not sustainable

RR: It's not sustainable plus it was against our fundamental philosophy, which was community development, so we didn't want fly in experts to come into communities, leave and so forth. We wanted people to trained in their own communities and they would become the local expert or advisor or helper. So, that was really the genesis of the training for trainers, it was the only way we could do this, is if we could train up trainers and allow them to do this

KB: *It's so interesting that this approach has been central to the development evolution of LivingWorks programs from day one and a philosophy that has really come into its own over the past nearly 40 years. From a couple of local trainers to thousands doing the train the trainer course in suicide intervention skills and building capacity right where they live, work and play. What a great example of how the community development model in practice over time.*

KB: What else do you think, in talking about the evolution of things, what about the move from the two day to safeTALK and now you've got the online START training, how did all that come about? Was it a natural progression?

RR: It sort of was; the safeTALK part started in Australia and it had to do with the work you were doing with ADF, they had an annual stand down where everybody had to get an hour long lecture about suicide and then they had the two day training and they came to us, in the early 2000s and said, don't you have something in between, like a one day? And at that time we were really scared of going in the direction of a one day because we thought that people would gravitate to that and say, we can do it in one day instead of two, we resisted and then with ADF pressing us, we sat down and said, well maybe we should take the blinders off and at least think it through, is there something that we can do that's in between? Out of that we came up with, yes there is, and as a matter of fact we can do you even one better than a day, we can give you everything you want a day, in a half a day, and over time it ended up being safeTALK and the advantage of safeTALK over other one day or half day programs was it's connected with ASIST, there's a natural bridge between the keep safe connection and getting them somebody that they maybe know that's been trained in ASIST and maybe in a mental health kind of environment. That's how safeTALK got started, it actually got started with the ADF making some prototype films, I can't remember all the reason but we felt that, ah it's not quite right and part of that was the perfectionist in us getting in the way of saying that it's got to be perfect, we took it home, we brought it back to Canada and we brought it back just at the very moment that we were bidding on a contract with the Toronto Transit Commission and their call for bids for a two day program, we worked with a big hospital health care center in Toronto to put in a bid. Halfway through the bidding process, they called a meeting of the bidders, we've changed our mind, we only want a one day program. We looked at each other and said, we're done, they changed the rules. So we were ready to quit and then we decided that, well we've got safeTALK on the development platform, we need money and some other things to really test it, instead of backing off, let's carry on with the submission, we'll include ASIST and safeTALK and an awareness program.

Anyway, they gave us the contract. This was in July, and they wanted a full testing and film development of the original safeTALK scenarios by November, that they could train some of their staff, it's like you've got to be kidding

KB: Thanks for giving us the job, but what have we signed up for

RR: Yeah, anyways we were able to do it and that is why the core vignette in safeTALK have this, there's a transportation kind of element to them, and then of course we designed safeTALK so that this one would give us a chance to have a whole library of scenarios that we could build or other people could build and then when you were doing safeTALK you could go, my audience, my country, my whatever and I'm just going to go to the library and these are the six that I'm going to pick for this particular course

KB: I just did that, last week with a series of scenarios featuring young people and the people around them all, all Australian which was fantastic, pick a mix from the library

(9:00)

RR: Yeah, yeah, yeah and that was our dream with safeTALK and we also hoped, and I don't think it has evolved quite that way, we hope that the cost of developing one of these vignette scenarios is not as much as it would to develop an ASIST video, that people may have the funds that they could invest in developing a scenario that is going to work for their community. The kind of resistance that started to come through was kind of along the lines of, we expect you guys to have the library and to produce all the vignettes and for us to try and push back a bit and say, well here is what it would cost us to develop these six scenarios for you and then your neighbor is going to come in tomorrow and want the same six only different. And you're expecting us to be the ones that come up with the money all the time, it's a bit of a challenge for people to see the value of putting up limited amounts of money to get something that adds to the library and what we did too was saying, if you put up the money and are willing to allow your scenario that belongs to your group or population to be put into the library, it's only going to cost you half price to do this and then your scenario will be available to everybody else

KB: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense because you want to be able to share across different occupations, different age groups, it doesn't make sense for LivingWorks or the particular demographic to be paying 100% for a new lot of scenarios every time

RR: And that's the difference between really walking the line between a an NGO charity organization and a social enterprise is the idea that this kind of investment is actually pooling monies that would otherwise not be enough to get something done but there is still that edge and I know in Australia that history has been there for a long time of saying, ah you know, charity organizations are the ones that should be doing this work and not some private entrepreneur

KB: What would you say as I'm a trainer if somebody says to me, well why should I go for LivingWorks as a for profit organization over this charity that does mental health first aid training or something similar, how do I answer that in my community?

RR: Well part of it is to get into that discussion, it takes money to run a charitable organization, somebody has got to get the money from the government or a charity to pay your salary and to give you some opportunities to develop better programming and better serve the people in your community, that doesn't magically come on a tree somewhere, there isn't a lot of difference when you think about it between asking people to invest in something that can grow and it's being reinvested in the community than it is for a charity to have to actually take time out every once in a while and write a proposal and make the cases that they should be funded to either improve or develop a new program, that takes away months of actually getting at it. And that was actually one of our dreams, that if we could come up with a way to raise the money and put development money aside so that when we needed to reinvest in and improvement or a new program, we could go to our own development fund and start on it right away

KB: And maximize time training instead of seeking out funds elsewhere

RR: Yeah, and now that's the future, now all kinds of people are saying that corporations have to take on more social responsibility, corporations have to become purpose driven or enterprise driven. There is a lot more opportunity than we had when we first started with the University of Calgary when the lawyers that were helping us set up, they said, well you've got two structural choices, you can organize as a for profit, or you can organize as a non-profit. None of these other options were available at the time in 1990/91 and then they said, but if you go for the non-profit then you as founders, can be board members or governors or workers but you can't be both but if you go on the for profit structure you can be both and our response eventually was, well we're too new into this whole thing, we don't really know whether it's going to work, it's too early for us to give up being a governor or a worker

KB: Yeah, you need to be both yep, you didn't have a lot of workers

RR: Yeah and we said, well ok then we've got to go with the for profit structure and then the advice the lawyers gave us, was you don't have to have the traditional bottom line you feed the shareholders, you can have a bottom line of whatever you want, and our original bottom line was, since there was no money anyway, our original bottom line was we wanted this training to be out in the world for free if it had to be, and it was because there was no income stream at the time and we were even chicken when we got to the point of saying, we started the pricing, sort of at the lowest level you could go, it was like well this course is worth quite a lot of money in terms of development but we think it's worth at least \$5 to you for two days but you don't have to pay \$5 you just give us a donation of whatever you want and then we moved from there to say, oh wait a minute, let's be firm about this and say, it's going to cost you \$5, and then we snuck it up to 10 and then got it up to 20 on the basis of well there's these materials and everything that you're getting plus there's all the development work in behind it, there's \$10 of this and \$10 of that for a total of 20 and that's how we had to sneak ourselves in to the idea of charging if you want.

In Australia when we were in Australia, Bruce and Lifeline people, they had a couple of experiences, one was if we provided the training for free, you ran the risk of everybody to nobody showing up, it was like, we've got to at least charge something in order for people to have to make the decision to have to give up the \$20 or whatever it might be or show up and get their money's worth and again it was a lesson learned that said, if you start giving it away, people aren't going to respect it

KB: There not going to value it

RR: And value it

KB: And that's in any field really

RR: Yeah, yeah

KB: I do see that from trainers that the philosophy still stands that they want to be able to...they don't want people to have to be personally disadvantaged financially to do the courses, I see that from trainers around the world, where they seek out funding to match that gap from government or business or whatever it might be and have some small amount that is paid by an individual so that they have that commitment but actually it's not a financial drain on them

(16:25)

RR: Yeah, and there's been some innovative funding that's been done.

I remember one of our trainers Gary McConaughy from California at the time, he was running a crisis center and he was making pitches to funders for, well we need X number of dollars because we need some more support staff and they kept getting turned down and then somebody said to him, look Gary, what you should be doing is making the pitch that we need ten more seats paid for and out of that money for the ten seats you will be able to hire your secretary or whatever it is, he changed his approach and started saying, we need X number of seats for this county or whatever and the money started to pour in because the donors were willing to pay for seats but they weren't willing to pay salaries

KB: Stuff, yep, yep. That's a common thing in the not-for-profit world too where, I want to pay for something that I can put my hands on

RR: Yeah and we got into this hands on thing, California with their money, they were developing a handbook on suicide prevention and the contract went out to a group of people at the same time we were doing our training there and at the end of our contract, they came to us and said, what you've done for us in California is better than any other contract that we've actually given out over the last three years and we have this one problem where we contracted these people to write this manual and it's bad but they have spent most of the money, we have a little bit of money that we could give you, if you would tidy it up, clean it up a little bit, well we said, ok, we'll do that and they also said, that if you do that you can have the rights to the book outside of California, we did that and of course when we got into it with the some of the perfectionists people in our group it didn't matter if there was no money for it

KB: You were doing it anyway

RR: Basically, yeah if our name was going to be attached to it in some way, we've got to do it right. And out of that came the idea of a handbook that would be handed to you and it would be tangible, you went home with it, we could rationalize part of the fee, \$20 or \$25 and we also the markup was pretty good but the participant went away saying, I got value for my money, well that worked for quite a while but then the CD and DVD system came in and we had to switch to a disc and we actually loaded the disc with a lot more information than just the manual, we had references and articles, we were pretty proud of what we're now giving you for the same \$20, well the participants didn't see it that way, they came back and said, what do you mean this little disc is \$20, you were giving me this book for \$20. For a lot of them, they could not get it into their head that there was \$20 worth of value in that little disc

KB: They were getting extra in fact, yeah

RR: And they were getting extra

KB: And so now, are we back to the handbook stage, where people can have a tangible book?

RR: I don't know whether we're there or not. But it is really a psychological thing of what you translate as value for your money.

KB: That's an interesting question for the future to I think, yeah constantly coming back to what is the participants perception of value for money

RR: Yeah, yeah and some of it's around the topic area, when we first had funding grant for people to test the waters with corporations, fortune 500 companies and what not and they looked at the quality of the product and in this case ASIST and they said, oh this is such a high quality program, I can take it into any corporation and they're going to want it because it's way above whatever else they are doing in continuing ed and we said, yeah, it's possible but it's also a stigmatized topic and we're not so sure they're going to see the quality right off the bat, they are going to see the stigma of being associated with suicide so go ahead and give it a go and they came back eventually and said, well originally they said, well we can get it to the CEO easy and if we can't, we can at least get to the HR person, no problem, we've never ever failed there, they came back several weeks later and he said, we couldn't even get into the HR and they were all apologetic and feeling bad and said, look we told you six weeks ago that this could be a problem but it really showed just how challenging whether it's mental health or this kind of issue in front of, a new audience

KB: It's similar to the course itself really, that without any conversation about attitudes and reflecting on that that you can't get to the skills training, it's the same as going in with your product to a CEO or a HR manager when you presenting, you're almost jumping ahead to here's the skills you need to learn but they're still back here in their own context or attitudes

RR: Yeah, I mean, that's precisely it, and you can be so excited and passionate about what you're offering them, and it gets very frustrating when they don't see it, the way you do

KB: That's a good question actually that would come from trainers for you. So they are passionate advocates of the model, the course, the approach and they are back in their community and they desperately want to train everyone they can and they are knocking on doors and trying to get as many bums on seats as possible but what are some sort of tips that you've got if they, you know, have those doors closed or the response is not meeting the passion that they're bringing to the conversation, when they are trying to engage people in, you know endorsing the courses in their community, what are some trips of the trade that you can offer to trainers in that aspect

RR: Well I think one has been fairly standard approach which sometimes isn't easy to go along with, it's the idea of, let me do a demonstration and let me do it with some of your senior executives, let's say willing to come and no strings attached, but what we're banking on is that experience will change whatever negative they may have had and even in the early days, it wasn't so much a trainer saying, let me do a demonstration but it was the California department that was bringing us in to pilot this, in a school for two days and we had the come in for

the first day to sort of say, who are these strangers in my building, this is my school and he sort of sat in it for a little while and then a long story short, he never left, that day one and he came back day two and he really got caught up in the whole thing but his first motive was to check out these interlopers in his school

(23:55)

KB: I love that, and then never left the room

RR: Yeah

KB: And that's a good suggestion though, do a demonstration or get a small group engaged and then go from there

RR: Yeah, and there is other things that, again these are idiosyncratic but I always think of if one, what's the city just North of Sydney...

KB: Newcastle

RR: Newcastle, I keep going to say New Glasgow but Newcastle and I knew that later on when I got to know Shane and knew that he came from Newcastle and I knew he'd been a school board person or an alderman, he'd been in politics or government but years ago there was a, one of the high schools in Newcastle was really a rough school, a tough school, a problem kid school and one of the teachers in Math or Social Studies was a trainer I guess, oh no, he wasn't a trainer but he knew of trainers and he brought them in from Sydney and they did a training of the kids and teachers, two day ASIST and then they did something I think is still quite unique, they decided to have a graduation ceremony to give diplomas certificates to those who graduated and they didn't do it right away, they wanted an event, like a graduation event, they scheduled an evening where the parents were invited, the kids were invited, the teachers were invited, the trainers from Sydney were invited to come up well it turned out to be one of the worst rainstorms in the previous several months

KB: Of course

RR: And so the two trainers from Sydney was like, what are we doing driving all the way up there, and they finally decided to go and then there was a feeling, well who is going to show up, the parents aren't going to be here, it's raining too hard and anyway they get there, everybody is there, all the mums and dads, all the students, all the teachers and they had this ceremony and everyone comes up and get there certificates and there was a ribbon on it and it was just wonderful and in fact it was so eye-catching if you want that the local MP got wind of it and actually brought that class to Canberra to show them off in the visitors' gallery of, this is what these people back home were doing

KB: That's a good lesson to learn actually that don't focus on the I guess the obviously engaged because that was a disengaged population but with one person who thought let's give this a go and then that results in the validation of their efforts and rewarding them focus which means you get the best effort of the suicide first aid skills that they actually got so much more out of that even beyond what they've learned in the two days

RR: And something had to happen with those kids who were rough kids that they were able to persuade their parents to show up for this silly ceremony if you want and the parents had that much, I guess faith or feeling in their children getting some sort of recognition because probably what they were mostly getting was phone calls from the principal about Johnny has done something bad again

KB: Exactly and here's a positive thing they could all engage in. It would be interesting to check in with that teacher and those kids.

(27:46)

RR: Yeah, it would be. And Shane and I have talked about this quite recently because I was telling him about it. And then we checked [unclear] and I thought I knew who the MP might be, but he checked it some more and found out it was a different person, in fact it was a women MP, and I don't know if he's followed it through

anymore but yeah, it would be, if you could find that teacher or one or two of those kids, it would be fun because you don't know if you find one of those kids and where they are now in life and what they might say about that school teacher.

KB: What other things stand out for you when you think of just those moments where you think, that was a turning point or just an amazing moment in the history of the work that you've been doing

RR: Well I guess in some ways I go back to Roger, Roger was the youthful enthusiast, it was like he was, he would jump for joy at almost anything that was kind of new, if we got invited to a small town in the next province, he would be the one that says, I can't believe this, can you believe this, look where we are and then it was somewhere else in Canada and then it might be some place in Europe or some other place and he was always the one, I can't believe we're here, can you believe we've come all the way from Alberta to this place and he was always reveling in what it meant to be somewhere for the first time and

KB: I love, even what you were saying before about Lithuania you know, when you hear these stories where a workshop has taken place, it must be pretty amazing

RR: And I remember one we did, I think it was in Brisbane, this was afterwards and we had a number of people from the Northern Territory, one fella was, I think he was, he might have been a Chaplin or a Chaplin Assistant up in the Territory but he was very original and he was having trouble studying for his presentation time, he was having trouble trying to understand the old overhead projector system and at one point, he had these reams of notes to sort of say, can you try putting them over here and just be you in terms of presenting, so he did that, tried that, it wasn't working all that well but the one I really remember was that, we had to tape down the power cords from the overhead projector to the plugins and he was wearing the slip-ons, what do you call them,

KB: Oh thongs

RR: Sandals, thongs and some of the tape had pulled off and he would step on the sticky tape and his foot would stick to the tape and that was making it worse because he was now trying to remember what he was supposed to say and now he's got to get his foot off the damn sticky tape, anyway he tried a couple of times and he just said, to hell with it and he kicked off his thongs and he was in his bare feet and then he was perfect, and his style and his presentation and his impact on the audience and

KB: In the zone

RR: Those are just wonderful, yeah, he was

KB: I can totally visualize that thongs sticking to the tape, I mean you can see it in your head but that's a good point about just even though fidelity to the model and understanding the reason why he's using that model doesn't mean that you're not your absolute self when you bring yourself and your personality into the training and your context and go bare feet if you need to, bare foot if you need to

(32:45)

RR: Those are and to say the other one that, I wasn't part of it but people like Lorna Hirsch I think was and I think Brian Tanney too but when they presented to the group in the Kimberley's and really nobody was interested in reading the materials and they just went with the model and everybody identified with the model and it worked for them and that the other one was with Lindy and others when they were in the Pacific Islands and they were doing two days with people from all the different Pacific Islanders, might have been 10 or 11 examples and the only thing that those people were saying to them about this kind of foreign training program was if you allow us to use, whatever word they had that was a close proximation to the idea of suicide and allow us to use that word in the practice sessions, that is all we need to be able to do, give us that permission and that the only change we have to make

KB: And we can go with it and take it into our community

RR: Yeah

KB: That's interesting when I did an interview with, Professor from Hong Kong and they were talking about a similar thing about the language that's used or not used and actually you need before you go into a training session you need to have a few conversations to the understand that and that's why it is so important to have the local trainers because you already have an understanding of that culture and community context, you're not trying to find your way, so it definitely plays to the importance of that train the trainer models so that you can have local people training local peopled.

KB: Amazing to see people adapting the program so they are culturally appropriate while still staying true to the evidence based and integrity of the model behind it.

KB: That's all the time we have today, Richard, thank you again for talking with us on today's episode.

RR: Thank you Kim. Great to talk with you today.

KB: I hope you've enjoyed hearing about the start of LivingWorks from the perspective of one of its founders. Join me for more conversation with Richard in the next episode.

Outro

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