

Let me take you on a journey regarding mental health…

Rail Responders Taunton

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Some eight years ago I was approached by a Superintendent of the British Transport Police (BTP). A committed Christian, he explained that he had developed a partnership with street pastors in North London to address the alarming number of suicides on the railway network.

In Taunton we pioneered ‘Rail Responders’ as BTP volunteers under the auspices of Taunton Team Chaplaincy. A team of a dozen local church members completed a programme of training provided by Street Pastors, Samaritans, the BTP and Network Rail/GWR.

Fortnightly patrols at the Station and in the vicinity of a high road bridge regularly targeted by those seeking to end their life have led to some significant encounters.

Key to all our efforts has been partnerships. The station manager famously described our service as like the station receiving a ‘big warm hug’!

Somerset County Council’s public health team is now promoting the Orange Button scheme whereby they are seeking to train members of the public in suicide awareness skills and hope that one day the initiative will be as well-known as the ‘Ask Angela’ protocol for women who feel uneasy and use the code word Angela to attract help.

Volunteers and, in some cases, even paid workers, can undertake Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) free of charge which helps them, personally and in their community role to be better equipped to react when some displays signs of suicidal thinking. Training opportunities vary from a 90-minute zoom session to two full days of class based input in either or both Suicide awareness or the certificated Mental Health First Aid qualification.

One Street Pastor named Jean completed her two-day course mid-week and on the following Saturday was the only female members of her team when they encountered a woman staggering about on the town bridge having swallowed tablets washed down with alcohol. Jean confessed that without her recent preparation she might have panicked. As it was, Jean came alongside and helped the woman accept help from two friendly police officers who took her by car to the local hospital without the need of a long wait for an ambulance by which time things may have deteriorated too far.

Strangely it was also Jean who accompanied me at Taunton Station when a young woman threatened to jump from a bridge. We helped alert the police who dealt with her but we were then able to support the rail staff and taxi drivers who had all been shaken by witnessing the incident.

It is not necessarily a comfortable journey but it is so worthwhile.