

Evaluation Report of the Alternatives to Suicide Program

COMHWA Member Briefing Paper

November 2023



1. Purpose

To outline the findings of an evaluative report about the guiding principles, structure and future development of the Alternatives to Suicide (Alt2Su) program.

2. Background

The Alt2Su program was pioneered in 2008 in Western Massachusetts by the Wildflower Alliance, who took inspiration from their experience of running a Hearing Voices group to develop a peer-led, non-clinical approach to help people experiencing suicidal thoughts.¹ The key principles of Alt2Su were to promote non-judgmental discussion about the experiences of the participants in relation to thoughts of suicide, that did not adopt the traditional approach of intervention found in public healthcare, and avoided a clinical approach and setting for the group.² Like Hearing Voices, Alt2Su has a similar focus on championing lived experience expertise, challenging medicalised/pathologising language and avoiding dehumanised methods of clinical intervention, that are especially prevalent in treating people with suicidal thoughts. The program was quickly adopted by a number of other US states, before being introduced to countries such as Canada and Australia.³

In 2017 a Western Australian steering group was formed to help adopt the Alt2Su method and core principles into local programs. Subsequently, the DISCHARGED program was founded, developing a collection of Alt2Su groups throughout the country that were run by, and for, the trans community. Since this time, more Australian facilitators have been trained in Alt2su approaches, leading to the establishment of different groups in New South Wales, South Australia and Western Australia.⁴ In W.A. alongside DISCHARGED, there are three additional Alt2Su groups—two that offer specific support for youth and women, and a Midland mixed group.⁵ In W.A. ConnectGroups and HelpingMinds have secured funding for Alt2Su programs through LotteryWest, and is presently seeking to establish more groups in the state.

3. The Issue

The ‘Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach’ report into Alt2Su was released this year by researchers at Curtin University.⁶ It is a report designed to clearly identify the key features of the Alt2Su approach that make it distinct, as part of a broader effort to develop a platform of evidence in favor of these kinds of peer-led programs. There is a regrettable lack of empirical, peer-reviewed data about peer-

¹ Alternatives to Suicide WA Alliance. 2022. Information Sheet. <https://connectgroups.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2022/05/ATS-Info-Sheet-no-EOI.pdf>

² Rhodanthe, L., Wishart, E., Watts, L. & Hodgson, D. 2022. ‘Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach: An Evaluation of the Theory, Values, Purpose and Practice.’ ConnectGroups, Curtin University.

https://connectgroups.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/05/Alt2Su_Evaluation.pdf Pp. 12—14

³ *Ibid.* p.9

⁴ Alternatives to Suicide WA Alliance. 2022. Information Sheet. <https://connectgroups.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2022/05/ATS-Info-Sheet-no-EOI.pdf>

⁵ ConnectGroups website. Accessed June 2023. ‘Join an ATS Group’ <https://connectgroups.org.au/alternativesto-suicide/>

⁶ Rhodanthe, L., Wishart, E., Watts, L. & Hodgson, D. 2022. ‘Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach: An Evaluation of the Theory, Values, Purpose and Practice.’ ConnectGroups, Curtin University. https://connectgroups.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/05/Alt2Su_Evaluation.pdf

led approaches like Alt2Su, leading to calls for researchers to fill this evidential gap with further studies.⁷ The report is intended to offer a first step towards developing evidence of the effectiveness of Alt2Su, by clearly stipulating the core methods and principles underscoring this approach. In order to offer support to the Alt2Su approach, the authors of the 'Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach' report outline some key critiques of the current standard medical practice in dealing with suicidal thoughts or actions, highlighting the limitations of current therapies: Psychopharmaceuticals to treat depression have been recently shown to have limitations on their effectiveness, coercive risk assessments in clinical settings build distrust, and episodes of involuntary hospitalisation have been shown to *increase* the frequency of suicidal thoughts and actions.⁸

By highlighting the limitations of the dominant approach to suicidal people in the contemporary health system, the authors of the Alt2Su evaluation also underscore the need to consider alternative paths to rethink engaging with people experiencing suicidal thoughts. They then clearly outline the principles and practices used in Alt2Su programs, emphasising the radical departure of these peer-led groups from the traditional biomedical paradigm of risk and clinical intervention.

The Alt2Su program is an excellent example of the benefits offered by a non-clinical peer-led approach that has been extremely successful in providing an alternative to the interventionist risk-based model of prevention used by hospitals and other Health Service Providers (HSPs).⁹ The introduction of more mental health services that include, at a fundamental level, peer-workers to offer advice and therapeutic assistance to other consumers is long overdue. In this light, Alt2Su programs represent an important milestone in the development of peer-led services to Australia.

Alt2Su is particularly important as an example of a peer-led program that explicitly champions the experiences of consumers and their desires over and above the clinical framework of risk management and intervention that has traditionally dominated the medical responses to suicidal thoughts and plans. Alt2Su programs thus provide a critically important space for consumers who have felt abandoned or traumatized by their experiences in clinical environments, and who are seeking a genuine alternative without the threat of welfare checks or involuntary incarceration in the name of their personal safety.

4. Response to date

Presently, in W.A. Alt2Su programs are not directly funded by government institutions. Suicide prevention remains a high priority for the W.A. Department of Health, with the state having a consistently higher rate of suicide than the national average.⁹ The W.A. Suicide Prevention Framework was released in 2021 and did include several recommendations that peer workers, and those with lived experience around suicide,

⁷ Schlichthorst, M., Ozols, I., Reifels, L., & Morgan, A. 2020. 'Lived experience peer support programs for suicide prevention: a systematic scoping review' International journal of mental health systems. 14(1). P.10
<https://ijmhs.biomedcentral.com/counter/pdf/10.1186/s13033-020-00396-1.pdf>

⁸ Rhodanthe, L., Wishart, E., Watts, L. & Hodgson, D. 2022. 'Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach: An Evaluation of the Theory, Values, Purpose and Practice.' ConnectGroups, Curtin University. https://connectgroups.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/05/Alt2Su_Evaluation.pdf pp. 10–12 ⁹ The National Mental Health Commission. 2019. 'Consumer and carer engagement: A practical guide.' [https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/lived-experience/consumer-and-carers/consumer-and-carerengagement-\(1\)](https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/lived-experience/consumer-and-carers/consumer-and-carerengagement-(1))

⁹ Australian Institute for Health and Welfare. 2022. 'Suicide and Self-Harm Monitoring. National Mortality Database—Suicide' <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/suicide-self-harm-monitoringdata>

should be involved in providing care for people experiencing suicidal thoughts. However, there is a striking tension at the heart of this proposal: the call for peer-led engagement comes directly after another recommended activity of ensuring ‘consistent assessment and early intervention frameworks and services for suicidal ideation and behaviour.’¹⁰

From the Alt2Su perspective, the prescriptive use of risk assessment and subsequent interventionalist clinical engagement is a key problem with contemporary treatment of people discussing suicidal thoughts.¹² There is accordingly a deep tension that exists between this style of peer led approach and the established methods of the healthcare system. A guiding principle of the government Suicide Prevention Strategy is that activities should be ‘Evidence-informed’.¹³

To support peer-led programs such as Alt2Su to become more accepted alternatives to the traditional biomedical interventions, further studies will be required to demonstrate the effectiveness of this approach.

5. CoMHWA’s Position

- CoMHWA strongly and consistently advocates for the development, funding and support of peer-led services and supports and the peer-workforce.
- CoMHWA is committed to supporting the Alt2Su program and encourages the expansion of alternative, peer led approaches to mental health care that move beyond the clinically-informed biomedical perspective of consumer distress.
- CoMHWA supports the expansion of peer expertise exemplified by the Alt2Su programs.
- CoMHWA is strongly in favor of efforts to develop new empirical studies into the effectiveness of Alt2Su to support expansion, but urges any new studies to be codesigned through collaboration with Alt2Su and other peer groups.

6. CoMHWA’s Action

- CoMHWA continues to strongly promote the Alt2Su program as a member of the W.A. steering group.

¹⁰ Western Australian Mental Health Commission. 2021. ‘Western Australian Suicide Prevention Framework 2021–2025’ p. 20 <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3505/wa-suicideprevention-a4-mk40-web-version.pdf> ¹²Rhodanthe, L., Wishart, E., Watts, L. & Hodgson, D. 2022. ‘Clarifying the Alternatives to Suicide Approach: An Evaluation of the Theory, Values, Purpose and Practice.’ ConnectGroups, Curtin University. https://connectgroups.org.au/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/05/Alt2Su_Evaluation.pdf pp. 11–12 ¹³ Western Australian Mental Health Commission. 2021. ‘Western Australian Suicide Prevention Framework 2021–2025’ p. 20 <https://www.mhc.wa.gov.au/media/3505/wa-suicideprevention-a4-mk40-web-version.pdf>





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