Upstream Prevention Parable

When communicating the vision behind upstream prevention, Sources of Strength Trainers often make use of the following anecdotal story. “There once was a man who lived in a village situated near a waterfall along a river. Every day he would take a walk along the river’s edge near the waterfall. On one particular day he heard a shout coming from the water and saw a kid caught up in the current, about to go over the waterfall. Springing into action, he swam out to the kid and pulled him to safety. The next day he was on his regular walk when he heard another shout and saw another kid in the current. As he pulled this one to safety he heard yet another shout from the current. The people of the village began to realize that there were an overwhelming number of kids caught in the current being swept towards the waterfall. They began to get organized; they trained lifeguards, built watchtowers and trained everyone in CPR and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. They saved a lot of kids but they weren't able to save all of them, some still went over the waterfall. One day the man started to walk upstream. The others began to say to him, “Where are you going? We need you here!” He replied “I’m going upstream to see if I can keep some kids from falling in the river in the first place.”

This story illustrates what we mean by upstream prevention. The truth is that most suicide prevention is really intervention. It focuses primarily on intervening in a crisis, training lifeguards and building watchtowers (gatekeeper training). It is often heavily focused on looking for risk factors and warning signs and making sure people in crisis receive the proper mental health care they need. This is obviously very important, but it is hardly enough to turn the tide of youth who face waterfall experiences in their lives and are unable to receive help or save themselves from the fall. When we move upstream in our prevention efforts, we are able to be truly preventative, to prevent the very onset of suicidal ideation or attempts. Upstream prevention seeks to build protective factors into a community, by teaching resiliency and coping, and strengthening youth-adult connectedness, so that, kids never fall in the river in the first place, or when they do they know how to swim and get themselves out of the river while the waters are still relatively tranquil.

Upstream Youth Suicide Prevention refers to “approaches that reduce risk factors or enhance protective processes that influence the likelihood that young people will become suicidal.” Engaging in upstream prevention, Sources of Strength aims to reduce the likelihood that youth will ever become suicidal, by focusing on strength and building protective processes into large populations (e.g., schools, colleges/Universities, or communities). By improving a youth population’s capacity to overcome difficult life challenges, we seek to lessen hopelessness and increase resiliency. Using trained peer leaders, we work toward enhancing positive school-wide norms for coping with emotional distress and life stressors that may be triggers for suicidal behaviors. Sources of Strength also works toward increasing the capacity of social systems themselves, such as schools or communities, to help meet the social and emotional needs of youth and young adults, thereby setting the stage for lower suicide rates later on in life.

Use this story and explanation to help cast the vision for upstream, strength based prevention efforts.