

## Suicide

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Why would someone do this?



Such an anathema for us humans.

We don't know what to make of it.

Some get angry and call the suicidal selfish for hurting the one's they left behind.

Some get despondent at the waste of human life  
Some get contemplative and ask the question why

But whatever your reaction there remains one fact. Each time we are confronted with the image of suicide it reminds us that we are all capable of doing it.

Perhaps that is what we really don't like about suicide.

## The paradox of identifying suicidal individuals

At present I am working in an environment where I have to assess the risk that people are of self harm and or suicide. Suicide frightens people more as compared to an accidental death or death from illness. The reasons for this seem somewhat self explanatory. Accidents and illness you can't really do anything about. But voluntarily taking one's own life is more disturbing as it can be stopped. Hence we get a wide variety of responses to a person who suicides. Some call it selfish, some say they have the right to take their life and so on.

People tend to reassure themselves with the idea that the majority of people who suicide or make a serious suicide attempt will tell someone about it prior to the attempt. This is a good thing as people will then tend to think, "Oh we can stop them because they will tell us first and then we can do something like put them in a hospital and that will make them better". "We just have to make sure we listen and we can hire people (like psychologists) to listen as well".

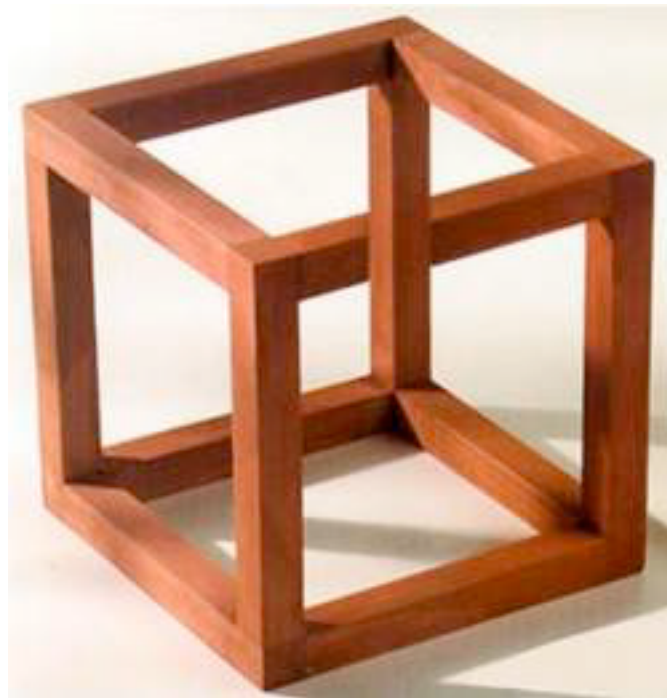


We hope everyone tells their suicidal secret, but they don't.

It is true that the majority do make some kind of statement to someone about the intent to harm self. From the research that I have come across it seems that 70 to 80 percent tell prior to acting on suicidal thoughts. Whilst these seem reassuring figures, very few then go onto thinking - The problem with this is it

means that 20 to 30 percent don't tell anyone. That is about 1 in 4 people who are seriously suicidal do not let anyone know about their intention to kill self . 1 in 4 is really not a very good ratio.

What I have done in my current job is to set about beginning to identify some of these individuals. This is a paradoxical task. Its like when taking a role call saying, "Put up your hand if you are not here". Or in my case, "All those people who are not going to tell someone about their suicidal urges, please step forward". Or "Please identify yourself, that you wish to remain unidentified".



(Paradox. Because the law in Australia requires counsellors to report seriously suicidal individuals to the 'appropriate' people, this directly increases the probability of a completed suicide by the seriously suicidal person. It means they can't tell the secret or talk about their suicidal urges because they know if they do then immediately they will be 'hospitalised' in some form. The directly forces them to keep the secret and not to tell).

I believe I have been successful to some degree. And I believe that I have been able to identify some of the unidentifiables. How to establish a relationship with them, how to ask questions and how to read responses. How to form a coalition with them where they can talk about their ideas of suicide and feel unidentified. No easy task I can assure you!!

So perhaps I have reduced the ratio from 1 in 4 to 1 in 3 who wont identify. I am sure there are still those others who will resist this pseudo identification that I create.

This of course is only part 1 of the intrepid journey of life. If you have a person who is in the 20 to 30 percent who won't identify self as suicidal, all of a sudden identify self to you, what do you do then?. You have a rapport with them that is fragile and tenuous at best. Well that is part 2, coming soon at a cinema near you.

## **Suicide and the law**

Who is responsible for suicide?

In Australia it is no longer against the law to commit suicide. Gee whoever thought up the law of making suicide illegal was really dumb!!

It is however illegal to assist someone else in attempting or completing a suicide. This includes suicide pacts. When two (or more) people make a suicide pact, that means they may both together take an overdose of medication so that they can die together. If one person dies and the other person lives then the person who survives can be charged with manslaughter or aiding and abetting a suicide.

The surviving person is seen as responsible (At least in part) for the death of the other person. So by entering into the pact you are seen as assisting the other person to suicide, by the making of such an agreement. I suppose by the copycat effect and so forth.



This of course raises the thorny issue of who is responsible for the death of a person who knowingly decides to take their own life.

### **Question**

At which point do you believe you have some personal responsibility for the death (suicide) of the other person.

1. A person tells you 1 month before that they feel like killing self and then do.

You take no major action to intervene.

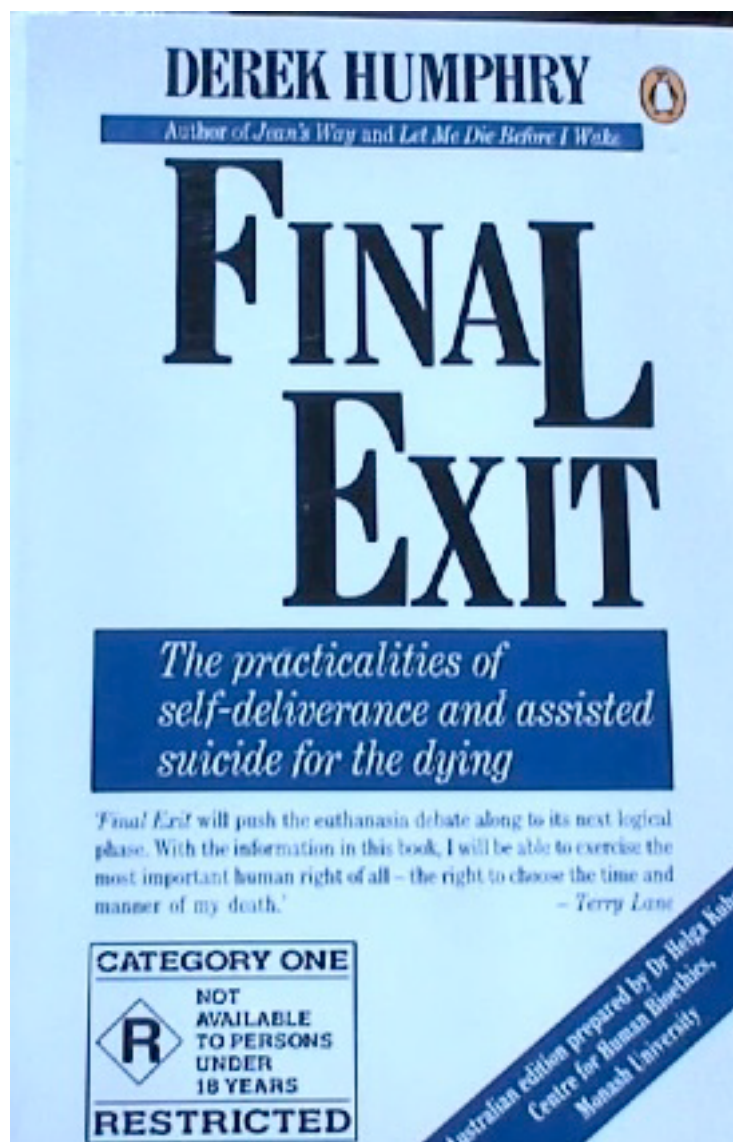
2. A person tells you 1 day before that they feel like killing self and then do. You take no major action to intervene.

3. A person whom you live with has made repeated suicidal gestures and again threatens to. You can't take any more and go away for a few days and the person suicides. Part of you feels relief that it is all over now.

4. A person threatens to suicide if you leave the relationship. You leave and the person completes a suicide.

5. A person tells you about how bad they have felt for so long and that they will kill them self. You say you understand and then they complete a suicide. You think that that is that person's decision and OK.

6. A person in the same circumstances (Despair for many years) asks about suicide and you give them the book "Final Exit". ( This is a book that that clearly describes methods of suicide). They use one of the methods in the book to suicide.



7. A person in the same circumstances (Despair for many years) asks about suicide and you purchase the poison for them as they are not able to move around to get it. They use the poison to suicide.

8. You travel with an incapacitated person to a country where assisted suicide is legal for the sole purpose of allowing that person to suicide and they do.

9. A person in the same circumstances (Despair for many years) asks about suicide and you purchase the poison for them as they are not able to move around to get it, and you prepare and administer it to the person because they are not physically capable of doing so.

In all these scenarios below the person is at least 25 years old, is fully aware of what suicide is and is not of low IQ, effected by drugs, or confused in their thinking. The person is very aware of what they are doing.

At which number do you feel morally/personally responsible for the person's suicidal death. This is not asking about the legal responsibility for the death, but where you feel morally/personally responsible for helping that person die.

## **Is suicide bravery or cowardice**

I think you start with an interesting point Rosie by calling people who suicide brave. I have certainly heard others say a similar thing. Then there are some who say that suicide is the cowards (not brave) way out. Their reasoning is that it is selfish because it hurts those left behind and the person is just avoiding their problems by not dealing with them.

To me either of these do not mean much. I can understand why people would think that about suicide, but my response is that I understand why people suicide. The question of bravery or cowardice does not even occur for me.

In suicide risk assessment one of the stated protective factors is children and family. This means that if a person has family in their current life then they are less likely to suicide. Married people suicide less than single people. One of the reasons for this is as you say - it would hurt the remaining family members too much. To my mind for the seriously suicidal individual family in this way are by and large inconsequential. When a person gets to that state of mind they are very self focussed and very self absorbed and so the welfare of others is not a high priority. One needs to look for other indicators.

So to my mind in suicide risk assessment family being a protective factor is a dubious criteria for the person who is seriously suicidal. From what I have seen a good deal of the process of suicide risk assessment is to make the suicide risk

assessors feel more comfortable about their decision making. Why would this be? Perhaps suicidal (vs accidental) death particularly frightens humans because it reminds us that we are all capable of killing ourselves.

At workshops on suicide risk assessment one often hears workshop leaders begin with things like:

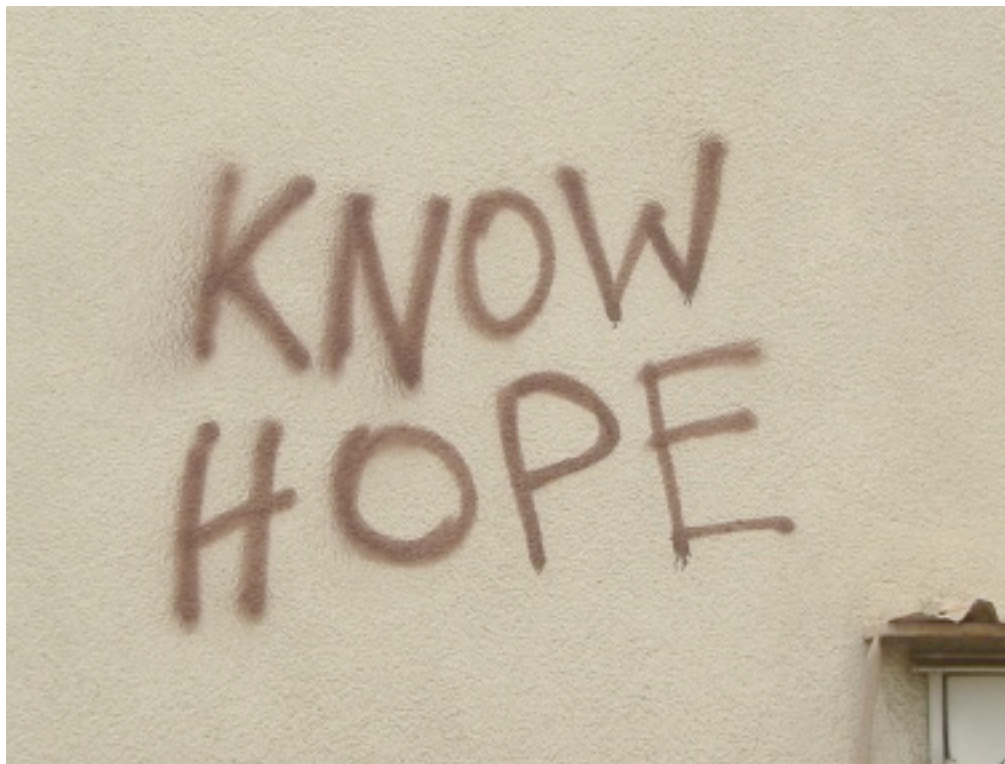
"Breaking myths about suicide"

1. Suicide is not inevitable (Myth - suicide is inevitable)
2. Change is always possible (Myth - change is not always possible)

and so forth. In my view in some circumstances those two things are myths. Suicide is inevitable and change is not possible sometimes. So from this you then have a risk assessment system that is based on two faulty assumptions. Which is not very good really. The system is already flawed because people want to believe all things can be worked out.

It is a bit like the belief I mentioned in previous blog about life being fair. Its nice to think that life is fair. Sometimes it definitely is not. Those two truths mentioned above are saying:

"There is always hope"



In my view sometimes that is not so

Take away all the pleasantries and the cold hard facts are that those two statements are sometimes at least not true. Political correctness runs rife through the theory and practice of suicide risk assessment

## The phenomena of suicide - murder

Nick states

"In another case in June 2006 a 28 year old woman, Angela Schumann also jumped off the Humber Bridge with her 2 year old daughter. Miraculously her and her daughter survived, with Angela shouting out for help as soon as they hit the water. They were very lucky to survive the 100ft fall into cold water, with the daughter surviving as she was zipped into her Angela's jacket!!!" (end quote)

It raises a significant point. The relationship between murder and suicide. Some see no difference between the two. Murder is the killing of someone else and suicide is the killing of self. Quite similar actions just in slightly different directions. Some see them as psychologically similar phenomena.

Although it may seem a little bit harsh, Angela Schumann who jumped with her two year old daughter did attempt to kill the daughter. That would seem quite clear, as obviously a two year old cannot make such a decision for herself. The fact that Angela was given only 18 months seems to demonstrate the the UK legal system is understanding of such things. I am not saying that she should have been charged but it does seem quite clear that she did attempt to murder her daughter.

I am surprised that murder-suicides are not more common. The individual has made the same decision to kill a person, they have crossed that line. Also if a person has made a decision to kill self then really they can go and do what they want, to who they want. The punishment effect of the law is irrelevant if one is dead or is going to be dead soon.



(One way to suicide is to get the state to kill you with the death penalty. The public hanging of two gay men in Iran)

Indeed this reminds me of a client who I treated for some time. I remember him telling me how he was having such a difficult time as he had not put in a tax return for the past three years. When I asked him why he had not done that he stated that for the previous three years he had been so depressed he felt that it was only a matter of time until he suicided. "One does not really bother about filing a tax return if you think you are going to be dead in a few months or so". Which when you think about it, he has a good point!

The relationship between suicide and murder is a complex and interesting one. Another connection between the two is through suicide by murder or getting someone else to kill you. That is to get another person to kill you legally or illegally.

There is a good article called "The Psychology of Suicide-Murder and the Death Penalty" By K. van Wormer. She describes a phenomenon called "Suicide-murder" (Not the usual "murder-suicide"), because in this instance suicide is not viewed as a consequence of murder but as its cause.



One way to suicide is to behave in such a manner that some one else kills you

Some people will behave in such a manner so that the state can legally kill them either by the death penalty or by being so threatening to police they shoot him/her to death. So this person is seen as being suicidal and simply engaging in the act of suicide which is performed by the state.