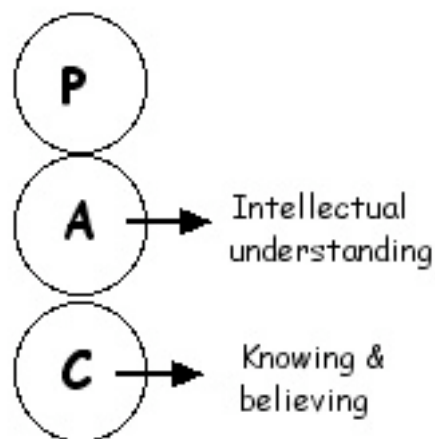


Teenage suicide

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What is the relationship between the teenager, suicidal thoughts and behaviour? As a group teenagers will tend to understand what suicide means in their Adult ego state but have much less understanding in their Child ego state. It is the teenager in this way which demonstrates the idea of intellectual understanding versus knowing and believing in the Child.

For instance consider superstitions. Most adults intellectually know that if you walk under a ladder it does not give you bad luck but many will avoid doing so. Touching wood we know in our Adult ego state does not bring us luck but many will do it just in case. Many who go to casinos know intellectually that they will lose their money but still believe that somehow they will be different and end up winning. People with OCD know that washing their hands 20 times is not going to make them any cleaner or safer but they will go ahead and do it anyway.



We all have situations where our Adult intellectual understanding is actually different from what we believe and know is true in our Child ego state. If it relates to touching wood and avoiding ladders then it matters very little. However it can also relate to other matters such as suicide and death. If you ask a 15 year old what would happen if someone suicided they would be able to tell you the facts accurately. They would say that the person would die, be buried and those left behind would feel great grief. However what they actually know and believe in their Child ego state may be quite different. They can have all sorts of other beliefs about not really being dead, being able to sit up and still watch others and so forth.

Indeed many adults can have this same contradiction in understanding. However it is accentuated in teenagers due to their less mature stage of

development. They can have an even more rudimentary understanding of death. Consider the development of the understanding of the concept of death.

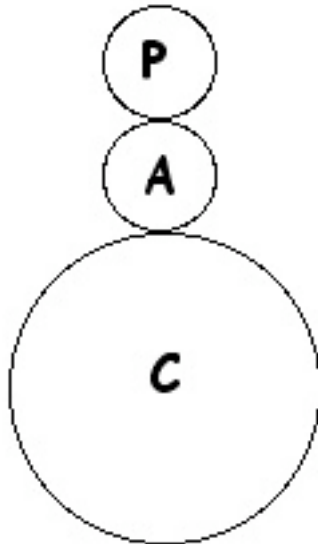


Teenagers are going to be teenagers no matter where they are from.

It is sometimes noted in the child development literature that children can develop a death phobia. At about 8 years of age the child can get what is sometimes called "8-year anxiety" where they develop a pronounced fear of death. As Piaget has shown prior to age 8 the child is egocentric with magical thinking that is prelogical. As a result up to the age of 7 children often think that death is reversible and that the dead can still see, hear and feel. At about age 8 the child's thinking allows it to understand that death is not reversible and thus it can hit that stage of "8-year anxiety" when it realises what is going to happen one day when it dies and when mummy and daddy die. In essence the child has an 'existential crisis' and has to come to terms with its own mortality for the first time. (Mussen et al(1974))

All adults are capable of what is called regression. That is we are all capable of going into our Child ego state such that our Adult and Parent ego states become largely non-functional. How many people are capable of a

significant regression to an age younger than 8? A significant number especially when they are in considerable emotional distress like many suicidal individuals are. If they regress then one's Child ego state understanding of what suicide means, is different from the reality known in the Adult ego state.



The regressed individual.
They will act in a very childlike manner.

In such instances their way of coping with significant stress becomes childlike. Indeed this is a natural reaction for us all. In adulthood the more stress we are put under, the more we will regress to the coping strategies we developed when we were young. For instance, if as a child you tended to hit out when stressed or frustrated then the more stress you are put under in adulthood the more likely you will act in a similar way. The same if you reacted by verbally attacking others, freezing, becoming compulsive, getting depressed or having an asthma attack and so on. The more stress we are put under the more Child we will become in our reactions, our thinking and our feeling. Thus some can start to think and feel about death the same way they did when they thought death was reversible at age 7.

In addition to this there are some people who use the defence mechanism of 'regression'. These people become very child like in their reactions, thinking and beliefs and can maintain this over extended periods of time. If they regress to about age 5 then a whole part of them will believe that some how death is reversible.

The point being made here is that teenagers are far more prone to such regressions because they still do not have the psychological maturity of an adult. Hence one can get suicidal behaviour from teenagers in what I have termed the naive suicide attempt. To explain further consider this piece of dialogue from an ABC radio interview. (I have put in upper case the parts I wish to highlight)

Fifteen-year-old South Eastern suburbs Melbourne school girl Holly, talks about her suicide attempts, (not her real name).



HOLLY: When my parents, probably. They separated and that and just a lot of little failures with school, with friendships, that sort of thing. It just felt as though it was all like falling down on me and, yeah. I changed a few friendship group type things and, and school, I wasn't doing as well as I used to and so I had to try a lot harder but I figured I didn't have to do the work and so, yeah. It just all led to this.

INTERVIEWER: And then what happened? One day you thought .?

HOLLY: Well I basically thought, you know, nothing's going right. I'm just not good enough any more. Too many things. Too many bad things have happened, there's no point continuing. All that sort of thing that just went through my head and I'm like, yeah, WELL I MIGHT AS WELL GO DO IT. Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: And so did you then attempt suicide?

HOLLY: Em, yeah. Yeah, a few times.

INTERVIEWER: So do you think the fact that you failed - to use a terrible term - the fact that you failed meant that you really didn't want to?

HOLLY: I think deep down I knew I didn't want to LEAVE because I mean deep down I knew that I was something. Just on the outside I just... It felt as though

I was failing too much. I just wasn't good enough and I'D NEVER ACTUALLY REALISED THE EXTENT OF WHAT I WAS DOING. I JUST DIDN'T SEE IT AS A SERIOUS THING.

(end interview)

Holly never actually uses the word suicide like the interviewer does. Instead she talks about going and doing IT, or she talks about leaving. Her final comment clearly shows the misunderstanding she has of what she was attempting to do. It simply had not been thought through and shows a naive child like understanding of attempting to take ones own life. (Interestingly it is quite possible that murderous teenagers are of the same state of mind).



When assessing suicide risk in teenagers this is disconcerting. As I have mentioned before in suicide risk assessment one can do a suicide decision

interview. This is considered most informative as the suicide decision is the defining characteristic of the suicidal individual. Unfortunately with teenagers and the naive suicide the absence of a suicide decision is much less conclusive in a suicide risk assessment. Teenagers are much less predictable than adults in this way.

Mussen, P.H., Conger, J.J. & Kagan, J.
1974. *Child Development and Personality*. Harper: London



A suicide note from a teenager. by Graffiti

In my final year at high school I used to carry around my creative writing expression book that I had for my English Literature class. I used to love writing even when I was that young. Every week we would be given a creative writing exercise to do. I always kept the writing book with me and would write bits and pieces when I felt it was right. Each week's exercise was then marked by the teacher and as I recall I did quite well. However much to my horror I think I was the teachers pet in that class. I always had to keep that quiet as it would have ruined my reputation to be the teachers pet!! My written expression book in some ways was one of my best friends, my companion.

Then one week I did the creative writing task by writing a suicide note, I wrote it just before my first suicide attempt. Obviously I survived the attempt and then I handed it in for marking by the English teacher. I remember her calling me into see her and she said that she was refusing to mark it. I asked her why and she said that it was too personal and she could not mark it. That always surprised me. In retrospect I am surprised that I was surprised.

The suicide attempt in one way had no meaning for me. It was something that I just did, and if I died I died and if I didn't I didn't. So for that weeks exercise I never got a mark. She never asked me to do another written exercise for that week and the final exam mark was the total for all the weeks. So I don't know how she worked my final mark out. But I passed anyway.

It was sort of a naive mindlessness. Being that young you don't really understand the consequences of what you are doing. You don't really understand about death. I had tried to kill myself but I had not thought it through. What it actually meant, I had not considered. As an adult I have seen TV shows and documentaries

about teenagers who have killed others and when asked why, they don't really have an answer. I understand that, because one does not know why. There isn't an answer except to say that it hadn't been thought through. You do feel bad, very bad, and you also feel very shut down. In this way there is no feeling and in this sense one becomes robotic. One just goes through the day to day movements to exist. So in the end the act of violence, in my case against myself, is just a robotic act with little feeling and little thought.

As mentioned before when I was 17 years old I made my first attempt at suicide. There were a total of two attempts, the second one being about a year later. Both times were on a Sunday night. Throughout my teens that was the worst time of all because I knew that I had another week of school to endure. High school was the most incredibly boring thing in my entire life. It was so, so, so boring. I love learning, have always loved learning, and still do love learning. School was 5 percent learning and 95 percent redoing the same learning. As an example I recall particularly being interested in maths in second year high school. Each week we would learn algebra, geometry and trigonometry. I was fascinated to learn the new formulas, calculations and ways of thinking with this mathematics. The problem was, you would learn the new stuff which was the good bit and then you would have to spend the next fucking week and a half doing exercises using those same formulas. I suppose this was sort of meant to somehow make it kind of sink in. It just fucking bored me out of my brain. Mistakenly I thought this was the same for everybody. It wasn't until my mid twenties that I started to realise that it wasn't the same for others. Because I thought it was the same for all I never protested and I just endured it.

When you are a teenager, school is the majority of your waking life, so I had to deal with this and in this way life seemed of little interest to me and in one sense it was meaningless. Then of course there is ones love life and that was a roller coaster. I recall the first sentence in my suicide note was, "Kerry didn't want me". Kerry, my girlfriend at the time had dumped me, or at least that's what I thought but it wasn't actually so I later discovered.

So for me it was a culmination of things. School was a big, big minus and this led to a robotic kind of existence. Combine this with a down turn in the love life and one was vulnerable. Add in the usual teenage disenfranchisement and alienation and you have got someone who is potentially fucked. To me, the anger of the violence in suicide was not apparent. It was more a matter of not fully understanding what I was doing and a sense of just acting with little thought or feeling. I just did with out realising what I was doing.



Johnny Depp as Edward Scissorhands captures
the robotic existence for me.
No great angst or anger or violence, just robotic.