

What is suicidal behaviour?

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Definition: Suicide (Latin - sui caedere) is the act of intentionally taking one's own life.

A lot is said about suicide bombers in these turbulent days. If one looks at intent then perhaps they are not suicide bombers if we use the above definition. If their main intent is to kill others and not self, then in this sense they are not intentionally taking their own life. A more accurate terminology would not be suicide bomber, but 'killer bomber'.

What does actually constitute a suicide?



Here are some ANZAC soldiers in the trenches of Gallipoli. As we know they at times had to climb out of the trenches and simply run at the enemy. They knew that as soon as they did so there was a high probability that they would be killed by gun fire.

I think most would say that these young men were not suicidal. However looking at it from a purely behavioural point of view, these men were putting themselves in a situation where there was a high probability they would die. Is that a suicidal act?. However their intent was not to die but to over power or kill the enemy. Perhaps one could better describe such people as pseudo-suicidal.

One could also say that the ANZAC soldiers were ordered to storm the enemy and thus it wasn't a voluntary act and thus not a suicide. This is an interesting question. If some one is ordered to kill self is that a suicide?

The suicide bomber in a country like Iraq may not be taking an order from a sergeant in the trenches but he is taking an order from some kind of religious instructor. Perhaps this is further evidence that the suicide bomber is only pseudo-suicidal.

One could then argue that the suicide bomber is doing what he is to become a martyr as we are repeatedly told in the press. This raises another question. If one kills self to become a martyr, is that a suicide? The intent is to become a martyr and the killing of self is just the means to an end. It seems more accurate to call that pseudo-suicidal.

Thus it seems there are three factors to consider regarding the individual who dies by his own hand:

1. Was the death the primary intention?
2. Was he is ordered to kill self?
3. Does he achieve some status like martyrdom afterwards?

What is the 'true' or real act of suicide? From a psychological point of view that is fairly easy to answer. The person who has a real possibility of suicide is the one who has a drive or urge to die in their life script. This person would be said to have a Don't exist injunction or has made the suicide decision in childhood. There are a group of people who have such a psychological state of mind and when discovered you know that this individual has the option that at some point they may intentionally end their life.

In this instance the suicidal act will be where:

1. Killing self is the primary intention
2. Where they are not following an order from some superior.
3. It is not for the purpose of achieving some kind of status after death.

These points would seem to distinguish the true suicidal individual from the pseudo-suicidal person such as the suicide bomber.

Accidents and suicide

I recently saw some statistics about the road toll in the state where I live. It listed the six main causal factors of road deaths in 2007:

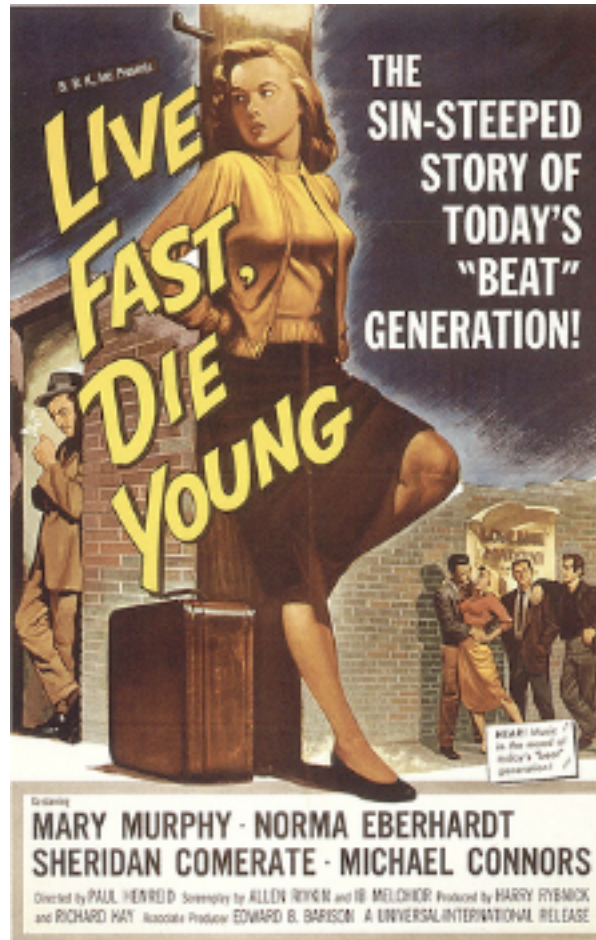
Speed
Fatigue
Inattention
Carelessness
Alcohol and speed
Alcohol



I have a close friend who lived with a flatmate about 4 years ago. She used to speak with me regularly about him because she was concerned. This flatmate often stated suicidal ideas and urges. One day he drove his car at high speed on the freeway straight into the pylons of an over pass. He died at the scene.

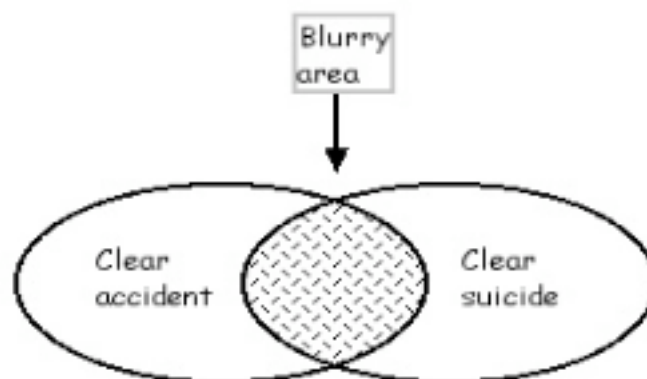
It is highly likely that suicide was a main causal factor if not the most causal factor in the crash. However as we can see the statistics show us that there was not one suicide related road death in 2007. Maybe these statistics are not telling the truth, or the whole truth.

I worked with a local ambulance service for 15 years as a trauma counsellor and over the years many of the 'ambos' mentioned to me that they thought some car accidents were suicides by the way they occurred. I have had suicidal clients tell me directly that if they suicide they will make it look like an accident, such as a car accident. There are two reasons for this. First, some life insurance companies are reluctant to pay out on suicides and second they don't want to leave their loved ones with the stigma of having a relative that suicided.



Teenagers have a higher level of suicidal energy

This is where the understanding of suicide gets murky. Consider a hypothetical client. A man attends counselling with me and states that he has for a number of years voluntarily placed himself in high risk situations repeatedly. The situations he puts himself in could kill him. Some times the risk is just a bit above average and sometimes it is quite a bit above average. Is this man suicidal? The name of my hypothetical client is Steve Irwin.



I would assume that if Steve Irwin was asked if he had any suicidal urges he would reply with an emphatic, "No". However he repeatedly placed himself in situations where the possibility of him getting killed significantly increased. Is that suicidal behaviour?

It is commonly acknowledged in psychotherapy circles that a person who is a heavy smoker for a long period of time has some kind of suicidal urges. That such chronic smoking is suicidal behaviour. How is the heavy smoker any different to Steve Irwin?



One of the specific clinical signs of a suicidal person is a history of high risk behaviour. This is one thing the psychotherapist can look for in determining the suicidality of a client. People who repeatedly and voluntarily engage in high risk behaviour. Examples can be involvement in the criminal world, high risk drug taking, extreme sports, severe anorexia, going to a war zone, being a dare devil, car racing, working with dangerous animals, a trapeze artist in a circus, having unprotected sex in high risk populations, prolonged heavy cigarette smoking, morbid obesity and so forth. In suicide risk assessment scales one finds this specific point asked.

The suicide attempter

An interesting permutation of this thesis on suicide versus accident comes from the person who is the suicide attempter. One hears stated that there are two main groups who exhibit suicidal type behaviour.

The suicidal person

The suicide attempter

They have different motives. The suicidal person wants to die and the 'suicide attempter' does not want to die. However the suicide attempter can die by accident in that they did not mean for the suicide attempt to be completed.

I had an example of that happen recently. A woman in her early 20s had sent an email to her boyfriend that she had taken an overdose. She knew he was very likely to get the email and save her as he had done so a number of times before. He never got the email and she died. As she had a history of doing this one can conclude that her motive was not to kill self. Her goal was to manipulate him to act a certain way which had worked on many occasions before. She wanted him to come and save her thus demonstrating his love for her in her mind.



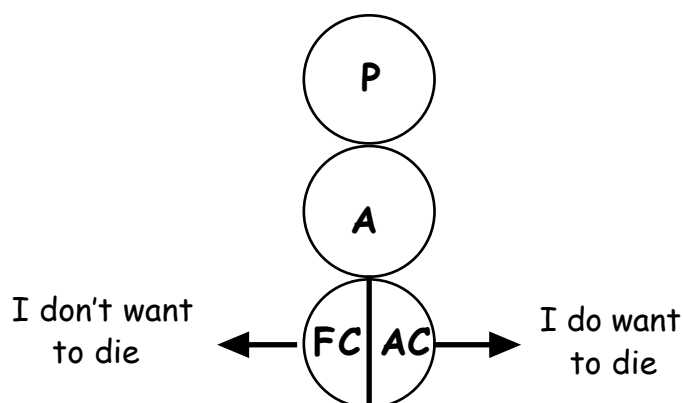
Would this grab your attention if you saw it? I think so.

However one needs to look at this situation more closely. If in her attempts at suicide she engages in acts that are highly dangerous then she is repeatedly engaging in high risk behaviour. On suicide risk assessment scales she would score on this point thus indicating that she is possibly suicidal to some degree.

It seems that the type of suicide attempt is significant for understanding the suicide attempter. If the attempts are clearly non-lethal then one can more safely conclude that the person is not motivated to kill self. They are making suicidal gestures for other reasons such as a cry for help or to manipulate others.

If the attempts are potentially quite lethal then the situation is less clear. Whilst the person may be acting in a suicidal way to gain attention there may also be some genuine desire to kill self. The individual may have made the suicide decision in childhood and thus in the psychological sense be 'truly' suicidal. However they may also have other motives as well such as manipulation and so forth. If they die in one of these suicide attempts then it may be partially a suicide and partially an accident. They are both a suicidal person and a suicide attempter at the one time.

Indeed one could argue that all suicidal people are suicide attempters to some degree because of the idea of suicidal ambivalence. I have postulated this before. All suicidal individuals are ambivalent to some degree. They all have an internal dialogue which states: "I do want to die vs I do not want to die".



All suicidal people have this contradictory set of thoughts and urges inside self. If a person is 100%, "I do want to die" then it won't be too long before they are. If a person is 100%, "I do not want to die" then there would be no suicidal thoughts or urges in the first place. The suicidal individual has percentages of both with the levels waxing and waning over time. Sometimes it will be 50/50 and then on other days it might be 60/40 or 30/70.

The individual shown in the diagram above would be classed as a suicidal person not a suicide attempter because they have made the suicide decision which is known in Transactional Analysis terms as the "Don't exist" injunction. However they also have a Free Child aspect of their personality and thus they don't fully want to die. So their suicidal actions are therefore at least at times going to be

half hearted, quarter hearted or third hearted depending on how much energy is in the FC and how much in the AC at the time of the attempt.

For instance a man reported to me a suicide attempt of a few years ago. He plunged a large fishing knife into his abdomen, then rang his mother on the phone. He could have very easily died and almost did. He definitely had made a suicide decision in early life and his AC energy was high at the time of the attempt. However he also rang his mother which in my view was an expression of his Free Child desire to live. So in this way one could say he was a suicide attempter and he was trying to manipulate his mother.