

Suicide

Almost everyone will, at some point or other, think about suicide. It is, in fact, surprisingly common for people to contemplate “ending it all”.

Many people feel overwhelmed in today’s hectic world. For some, this can lead to feelings of helplessness which can turn into depression. This can trigger a sense of hopelessness, which can in turn set off a downward spiral of negative thinking.

While it’s not unusual for those suffering from depression to have thoughts of dying, the majority find the help they need to get through the dark times. Others, however, feel unable to stop the slide into despair. The lower they go, the fewer options they believe they have, to the point where some will feel the only way forward is to stop living.

Anyone who has been through this experience understands that suicidal feelings are terrifying. Having said that, the vast majority of people who have contemplated killing themselves will tell you that the feelings pass, no matter how unbearable they may seem at the time.

Anyone who has been close to someone who has killed themselves will also tell you of the emotional devastation that is left behind. And although controversy still surrounds the right to take one’s own life, the fact remains that anyone seriously contemplating suicide is in urgent need of sensitive support and compassionate care. If you’d like to discuss any of the issues raised in this help sheet, the Assistance Line is available for practical and emotional support.

“ There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide.”

Albert Camus, French author
(1913 –1960)

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Why do people commit suicide?

There are many reasons why people contemplate suicide. According to the Samaritans, a charity which specialises in providing support to the suicidal, there is rarely just one reason why people want to take their own lives. It is rather an accumulation of difficulties that leave some people feeling that there is no way out.

The kinds of problems that might increase the risk of suicide include the recent loss or the break up of a close relationship, an unhappy change in circumstances, or a painful or disabling physical illness. Other experiences that can push people over the edge include bereavement, bullying, loneliness and financial difficulties.

But while these are events that can affect almost everyone in life, there are other factors that make people more vulnerable to killing themselves. These include a history of suicide in the family or a history of previous suicide attempts or self-harming. While thinking about suicide is not in itself evidence of mental illness, people suffering from conditions such as severe depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia can be particularly vulnerable.

There is also a very high correlation between suicide and substance abuse. Alcohol and drugs affect people's capacity to think and reason. They also act as depressants and decrease inhibition, which can make a suicide attempts more likely. Substance abuse is also often a result of early experiences of loss or neglect that may compound someone's vulnerability in later life.

Who's at risk?

Research cited by Mind, the mental health charity, has also shown that suicide rates are higher in men than in women across all age groups. This is often put down to the fact that men are less likely to talk about their problems and therefore more prone to depression.

It has also been suggested that shifts in gender roles have left many men feeling unsure of their place in society. In the 25-44-year age range, men are 3.5 times more likely than women to take their own lives, while men aged 45 years and over are more than twice as likely to die by suicide as women in the same age range.

Amongst young people (15-19 years old) girls are more likely to attempt suicide, but boys are much more likely to die as a result of a suicide attempt. Self harming is more common among young women. Cutting, burning and scratching can be used to

cope with overwhelming feelings of shame and fear, transforming emotional distress into physical pain. According to Mind, people who deliberately harm themselves are not necessarily suicidal, however there is evidence of a link between attempted suicide and self-harming behaviour.

Suicidal or self-harming behaviour is often described as just a "cry for help", as if this means it is not to be taken that seriously. It is extremely dangerous to treat talk of suicide or self-harm as frivolous attention-seeking. Anyone who feels bad enough to be thinking or talking in these terms is in deep distress, however much they may or may not really want to die. If these feelings are familiar to you, it is vital that seek some kind of help (see below). If someone you know is talking like this, don't be afraid of listening to them. Talking about suicide with a sympathetic listener has never driven anyone to kill themselves. You may very well save their life.

Suicide fantasies

One of the many tragedies of suicide is that people who think about killing themselves often do not really want to die at all. On an unconscious level, they're yearning for something else, but amidst the mental and emotional confusion of deep depression, they think that dying is the only way to get it.

- **Rest.** People who are very fractured internally and weighed down by depression will often just be desperate for a sense of peace and calm. They don't want to be dead, they just want to rest. Ironically, rest is desired in order to find the energy and peace of mind to carry on living, but this wish gets distorted into the fantasy that death will provide the answer. Of course, the problem is that once you die, you don't wake up.

- **Revenge.** While suicide is clearly an act of violence against the self, it is often more accurately an act of violence against a part of the self that a person feels has been put into them by others. So people who feel that they have been mistreated and misunderstood can harbour deep aggression towards the frightened part of themselves that has, in some way, been created by that mistreatment. Paradoxically then, the underlying fantasy of suicide is that someone else is getting killed.

- **Control.** A potent fantasy that lies beneath many suicide attempts is the fantasy that it restores some kind of control in lives dominated by a sense of helplessness. There is evidence to suggest that some people can become positively upbeat as soon as they make the decision to kill themselves, if only because they have found a way of directing their own destiny. Some therapists have also highlighted the paradox that suicide can be viewed unconsciously as a final act of protective defiance against overwhelming forces, creating the unconscious belief that something precious inside will be preserved by the destruction of the body. It should go without saying that all of these fantasies reflect deep needs that can be met without resorting to suicide. A sense of peace and rest can be restored by finding sources of support and spiritual nourishment, a desire for revenge can be worked through by accessing the capacity to express anger, and a sense of control can be located in small but consistent acts of self-care.

“Hope is a necessity for normal life and the major weapon against the suicide impulse.”

Karl A. Menninger, American psychiatrist (1893-1990)

Warning signs

As we have seen, it is quite normal to have distant thoughts of suicide from time to time. It is also not uncommon among people struggling with depression to have actively suicidal thoughts without any intention of actually killing themselves. There are, however, some warning signs that should be taken very seriously as evidence that thoughts are moving dangerously close to actions.

- **Making concrete plans.** These might include making a will, taking out life insurance or getting one's affairs in order. You are also moving into the danger zone if you start making specific preparations, such as saving up sleeping pills or working out how you want to be found.

- **Feeling that others will be better off without you.** Many people who contemplate suicide do not go through with it because of the impact they realise their death would have on loved ones. Once

people start firmly believing that those close to them will genuinely be better off without them, their vulnerability increases dramatically.

- **Marked changes in behaviour.** Some people, as we have seen, might suddenly access feelings of calm and serenity once they've decided to kill themselves. Alternatively, they might become cut off and withdrawn, or completely let go of their appearance or stop looking after themselves.

- **Talking about suicide.** This may sound obvious, but it's a myth that people who talk about their desire to commit suicide don't go through with it. Most people who take their own lives have mentioned their desire to do so to someone. While talking on its own isn't necessarily helpful, having someone who can really listen to what is going on emotionally can make the difference between life and death (see below).

Prevention strategies

If it's you who is contemplating suicide or someone you know, it is crucial to hold on to the reality that these are feelings that pass, no matter how catastrophic they may seem now. Feeling suicidal is driven by the fear that one has reached the end of one's resources, but with the right kind of support, resources can be restored and replenished, pain can be processed, and new ways to live life can be found.

Get help. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, it's important to get some kind of outside support. Overwhelming feelings are very difficult to process on one's own. Leaving aside the moral arguments for or against suicide, you can only hope to sort out your feelings in dialogue with someone else. There are organisations, such as the Samaritans, that run helplines staffed by people with special training in talking to people who are suicidal. Alternatively, the Assistance (see details on page 4) will connect you with an experienced counsellor/psychotherapist who will help you think through the issues and decide on the best way forward. If you have someone in your life who is feeling suicidal, Mind recommends discussing strategies with them for seeking help. One way of doing this is to create a personal support list that might include the names, phone numbers and addresses of individuals, helplines, organisations and professionals available for support. The person concerned might then want to keep this list by the phone, so they know that help is within easy reach when they're feeling suicidal.

Address risky behaviours. As we have seen, heavy drinking and substance abuse represent significant risk factors to people who are feeling suicidal. Eating disorders and self-harming behaviours are also very dangerous. If you or someone you know is really struggling with these kinds of issues, it may well be that that's where the focus needs to begin.

Organisations such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Overeaters Anonymous provide life-saving support to millions of people every year. If the habit or addiction is really affecting physical health, a local GP might be the best place to start. It is also often not until the behavioural problems have been managed that deeper questions can be addressed.

Address underlying issues. While suicidal tendencies need to be taken very seriously in themselves, they are always linked to deeper underlying emotional difficulties. These issues are often complex and buried in the unconscious, which is why longer term treatment is often required. If you call the Adviceline, a consultant will help you think about whether counselling or psychotherapy is what you need, and if so, what kind would be the most helpful to you.

Finally, if someone you know has committed suicide or even attempted suicide, it is also very important that you get robust support. The people who are left behind are often faced with the unbearable feelings that the person who has killed themselves or attempted suicide could not cope with. This can lead to powerful experiences of both anger and guilt. Even in office settings, the suicide of a colleague can have a devastating effect on work teams. Do not underestimate the impact.

Further help and information
Hospitality Action
www.hospitalityaction.wellonline.co.uk
0808 802 2111
24-hour Assistance Line providing emotional and practical support.

We've got you.

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