

Peter Hicks

Suicide

Suicide: every day 275* people in Britain attempt to end their lives. Not all of them succeed, but many of them do. Every day a far greater number consider the possibility of suicide. Many of these never go on to attempt it, but some of them do. The knowledge that someone we know is thinking about suicide places a heavy responsibility on us. Even if we suspect that there is little possibility that he or she will reach the point of attempting it, we must never ignore the possibility. Preventative action must be taken.

But, equally, we need to remember that in the last analysis those who take their lives are responsible for their own actions. We do not have to carry the burden of responsibility for their death. We should never allow them to blackmail us emotionally, either before or after the deed.

There are many reasons why people attempt to take their lives. Perhaps the main one is because they have lost hope; they can see no other way out of an intolerable situation. But people can also kill themselves to spite others, or in a last pitiful attempt to gain attention or to manipulate a situation, or out of a desire to rejoin a loved one who has died. Often a suicide attempt is a 'cry for help', with no real intention to go the whole

way; tragically, such 'cries for help' do often end in death.

Although some people, such as those prone to depression, are more at risk, anyone could reach the point where they think of taking their own lives. Never classify someone as a non-suicidal type; it can be that those we would least expect, without any warning, will take their lives.

The possibility of suicide depends on the availability of means. In the 1960s there was a significant drop in the number of suicides due to the introduction of natural gas. Up to then the typical British way of killing yourself was to stick your head in a gas oven. Unlike 'town' gas, the new gas was non-toxic. There has been a parallel drop in numbers since the introduction of catalytic converters in many cars; the exhaust fumes are considerably less toxic. Clearly, a jar of pills on the bedside cabinet or a gun in the drawer will make it more likely that at a moment of deep darkness the attempt will be made.

Helping those you think might be contemplating suicide

Do something. Don't just leave it. Contact their relatives, or someone suitable at their school or

place of work. If they are seriously depressed or exhibiting disturbed behaviour patterns, contact a doctor; there may be need of help in a psychiatric unit.

Talk to them about the problems and pressures that have driven them to think of suicide as the way of escape. Demonstrate to them that it is not the only answer and certainly not the best one. Point out that suicide is a very permanent answer to problems that, though large, are only temporary. Show what a devastating effect their suicide would have on their family and friends. Offer help and hope.

If you can, remove any possible means of suicide, such as tablets.

Be available, or make sure someone else is, at any time. Give them the Samaritans' phone number (116 123, Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090 Stirling FK8 2SA, and www.samaritans.org). Encourage them to contact you or someone else when they are feeling particularly low. Assure them they can always talk to someone at any hour of day and night.

Be a patient listener. Keep offering love, acceptance, support and reasons for living. Many suicidal people urgently need the security of a stable relationship in which they feel accepted and loved.

Pray for and with the person. Get others to pray, and tell the person they are praying. Suicidal people often feel unable to pray for themselves, but the knowledge others are praying offers them hope. Regularly place them through prayer in God's keeping; you don't have to carry the burden of anxiety over what they may do – hand it and them over to God (1 Peter 5:7).

If necessary, ensure they are not left alone.

Do all you can to ensure that the issues that have driven them to think of suicide are dealt with as far as is possible. This may involve getting help over external factors like school bullying or a highly stressed job or marriage problems. Or it may be a matter of arranging professional counselling to deal with emotional or personality needs, such as fear, self-rejection or depression. Make a special point of affirming and encouraging them. Speak to them of God's care and love

for them; demonstrate that love in your own life. Give them hope. If their faith is low, carry them on the shoulders of your faith. Gently build up their self-confidence. Teach them coping skills. Help them to form balanced and mature judgments.

What could I say?

Accept that as you are at the moment, you are not the best person to decide the way out of your problems. The pressure you are under means that you are not really able to think straight. You need someone to advise and help you.

Find someone you can trust and talk to them about how you are feeling. It doesn't matter whether it is someone you know or a stranger, such as a counsellor or the Samaritans.

There is an answer. However big your problems seem to you, remember that with help you will be able to find an answer. Many people with the same problems have found answers. God, in his love and grace, is ready to show you his way through.

I'm going to pray for you. Without breaking any confidences, I'll get others to pray for you. Even if your faith is very small, we have strong faith in a strong God, and are going to ask him to keep you, especially in your darkest moments, and bring you through.

Choose life. At a time when your mind is clear, make a definite decision that you wish to live and not die. Get rid of any means by which you have thought of taking your life. If you feel you can't really trust yourself, get someone to stay with you so that you are never left alone.

Use the lifelines others offer you. Make a contract with those who are standing by you that you will always be honest and contact them when the pressure to take your life begins to mount up.

When you feel ready, with the help of your friends or your counsellor, set yourself to begin to crack the problems. Accept that it will take time and may be hard work. But with God's help you will do it.

Helping those who have been bereaved through suicide

Our culture still tends to attach a stigma to suicide.

To counter this, and because of the awfulness of the experience they are going through, those who have been bereaved will need special love, acceptance and support, as well as all the normal help and support we would give to any bereaved person (see Bereavement).

Encourage them to be honest and express their feelings. These will range widely, and may well be bewildering and distressing. For example, they will almost certainly feel anger, and may find that it is directed not only at the circumstances that have caused the suicide, but also at the person who has committed suicide. Help them to understand what is going on as they face the shock and pain of their loss; assist them in off-loading their emotions; be patient and very gracious.

Urge them to use all the resources for help they can find, including their doctor, minister, counsellor, and specialist help and support groups. Because of our society's attitude to suicide, they may tend to try and hush the thing up, to withdraw and hide themselves away. While respecting their right to privacy, we must discourage any withdrawal that is in effect a refusal to face up to what has happened.

Just as many bereaved people go through a period of denial, those who have lost a loved one through suicide may go through a period where they are able to accept the death but deny that it was suicide, insisting, say, that it was an accident or a 'cry for help'. Unless such denial has damaging repercussions, we may well feel that it is in fact a helpful way of lessening the awfulness of their loss, and so we should not be quick to try and correct it.

Those close to a person who has committed suicide, especially parents of a young person, often carry a heavy burden of guilt. This may well be an expression of anger turned in upon themselves; but, very often, there is an element of warranted guilt: they could have done more to prevent the suicide. Where this is so, we should encourage them to talk things through with a minister or Christian counsellor (see Guilt).

As with any bereavement, encourage them to talk about the person who has died and to treasure memories of her or him. Help them not to let the

fact of the suicide overshadow everything else; that was one brief action; there is a whole life to remember and treasure.

The grieving process is likely to be more intense and longer than in the case of a normal bereavement. As far as you can, keep in close touch throughout. Watch for any danger signs, such as acute depression, and ensure appropriate help is given. Be aware that once there has been one suicide in a family or close circle of friends, the chances of another are considerably increased.

What could I say?

You are facing bereavement in one of its darkest forms. All the signs and stages of grief and loss and hurt are likely to be intensified. You will need all the help you can get. But, remember, others have walked this dark road and come safely through.

Get help. Get in touch straight away with a trusted friend, minister or counsellor, with whom you can be open about your feelings, and who will stand by you and help carry the load.

Make the most of all the support that is available to you. Find a local support group for those bereaved through suicide. Make the most of all their resources. Ask your housegroup or circle of Christian friends to stand by you and support you in prayer and in every way. You may feel tempted to withdraw, perhaps because of a sense of shame. Don't do this. At this time, of all times, you need the help of others.

Try not to worry about other people's reactions. Some people cannot cope with the concept of suicide and may show this in their attitude to you. Try to ignore this; it is their problem, not yours.

Go gently on yourself as your body and emotions react to the awfulness of what has happened. You will probably go through a period of shock and unreality, which could last for weeks. Don't worry about this; it is a fairly normal reaction.

Don't be too concerned if you find yourself feeling considerable anger. This is basically anger at the awfulness of what has happened; try not to let too much of it be turned on to people or on to the person who has died. This can be very destructive.

Talk to your minister and counsellor about your feelings of anger and let him or her help you off-load them in a constructive way.

In the same way, deal wisely with feelings of guilt. You may well find strong guilt feelings arising. But remember that you do not have to carry the responsibility for other people's actions; what they do is, in the last analysis, their choice and their responsibility. But if you feel that you bear part of the responsibility, talk with your minister or a wise Christian friend who will help you find God's forgiveness and healing.

Take special care when you feel down or stressed. Those who have lost someone close to them through suicide may themselves be more likely to attempt to take their lives, and parents who have lost a child through suicide are more likely to suffer a marriage break-up. Guard yourself carefully against such things.

This article is an extract of **Peter Hicks'** *What Could I say?* (IVP, 2000), used with kind permission from SPCK Publishing.

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Helpful Information

A helpful book is G L and G C Carr, *After the Storm: Hope in the Wake of Suicide* (IVP).

The Samaritans can be reached at Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090 Stirling FK8 2SA, helpline 116 123, www.samaritans.org

About Living Leadership

Living Leadership exists to help Christian leaders live in Christ joyfully and serve him faithfully.

Find out more about our ministry, and access more useful articles, on our website: www.livingleadership.org

*The national suicide figure for England and Wales in 2019 was 5,691. (Source: Samaritans)

