

Suicide is Forever

By Barrington H. Brennen, 1999, Update March 2013

Question: Why do people commit or attempt suicide? Are they truly crazy? How can I help someone who is suicidal?

Answer: Suicide is a subject that we, in the Bahamas, do not talk much about. We are often judgmental, critical and indifferent toward persons who are suicidal, very depressed or troubled. Many persons in our country attempt suicide each year and many of those succeed.

One does not have to be "crazy" to think about suicide. Most times we think that if someone killed herself, she must have been "crazy" to do so. Some mental health professionals indicate that most people who kill themselves are not mentally ill. They mean that there is not history of long-term depression or any psychological disorder. Most of them are just normal people who for some reason decided that life was just not worth living anymore. Other professionals say the a suicidal person is mentally ill. On the other hand one statistic report in the United States (2004) indicates that "more than 90 percent of people who kill themselves have a diagnosable mental disorder, most commonly a depressive disorder or a substance abuse disorder."

It is important to understand that most people who attempt or complete suicide are so sad, hopeless or angry that they simply can't stand it anymore. Paul G. Quinnett says in his book, "Suicide, the Forever Decision," that people who are suicidal "have been dealt such a terrible blow by life that they are overwhelmed and can see no other way to end the feeling of loss and loss of control over their future. But they are not crazy. And, most likely, neither are you."

Many view suicide as they do cancer and AIDS. They act as though it will always be the other person and not themselves. However, over a period of bad crisis management, continually being put down by others, low self esteem, constant failure or serious loss, the thought can come your way.

Unfortunately, many Bahamians are on a slow road to suicide, and they know it. Since they think there is no one to love them, they get into drugs and a destructive lifestyle that knowingly could lead to death. Some can't see life beyond forty, so they deliberately set themselves on a course to fulfill the mission — the slow road to suicide. Since nobody cares and understands them, they wallow in a life of low self esteem, sex, and drugs.

Here is what **Dr Thomas Joiner**, leading expert in suicide studies states about most recent theories about the different types and different motivations for suicide (2012):

- The result of a mental illness (e.g. dysfunctional behavior, clinical depression, schizophrenia)
- The result of reckless behavior (e.g. substance abuse, dangerous or life threatening activities)
- to end physical and/or emotional pain (e.g. inability to cope, situational or episodic despair, relief from suffering, guilt, shame or loss, physical pain or debilitating illness)
- To send a message or obtain an outcome (defiance, notoriety, vengeance, leave a legacy or aftermath)

- Altruistic or heroic act (relieving others of burden, to save another, to die for a cause)
- As a rite of passage (to express manhood/maturity, to make a religious journey, sacrifice to a god)
- To express one's right to choose (creative expression, considered choice, the right of an artist)
- Symbolic interest in the means/location.

Based on these motivations for suicide it is clear to me that although most who commit suicide have a mental illness (even if it is not for a very long period), yet some do commit suicide who do not have a history of mental illness and may not be long-term clinically depressed or have any other psychological disorder (Brennen).

What are the warning signs of suicide? Sometimes the person uses direct statements such as: " I want to die, " or "I don't want to live any more." There can be indirect statements such as: "I want to go to sleep and never wake up," or "They'll be sorry when I'm, gone," or "Soon this pain will be over."

The behavioral signs of suicide can be any of the following:

- 1) Sadness and crying.
- 2) Lack of energy.
- 3) Increase or decrease in sleeping patterns.
- 4) Increase or decrease in appetite.
- 5) Inability to concentrate or make decisions.
- 6) Confusion.
- 7) Angry and destructive or boisterous behavior.
- 8) Withdrawal from usual social activities, loneliness.
- 9) Drop in grades. Inability to complete assignments or pay attention in class.
- 10) Giving away possessions.
- 11) Making final arrangements - will, insurance, funeral.
- 12) Increase risk taking; for example, driving a car recklessly.
- 13) A previous suicide attempt.
- 14) Increased use of drugs and alcohol.
- 15) Neglecting personal hygiene and appearance.
- 16) Recurring themes of death and self-destruction in poetry composition, writing assignments or art work.
- 17) Change in sexual behavior.

The situational signs of suicide can be any of the following:

- 1) Loss of significant relationship.
- 2) Difficulty communicating with parents.
- 3) Problems with school or employment.
- 4) Trouble with the law.
- 5) Unwanted pregnancy.
- 6) Serious physical illness.
- 7) Mental illness.
- 8) Family disruption (unemployment, separation).

How can you help someone who is suicidal? Here are a few interventions:

- 1) As far as possible seek professional help. Call a doctor, counselor, or take the person to the hospital.

- 2) Make sure you learn the warning signs.
- 3) Be available. Show interest and support.
- 4) Be willing to listen. Allow expressions of feelings. Reflect feelings accurately.
- 5) Offer empathy, not sympathy.
- 6) Be nonjudgmental, even if you feel strongly that suicide is morally wrong.
- 7) Be direct. Ask them openly if they are thinking of suicide. Discuss the idea directly and honestly.
- 8) If they say they are thinking of suicide, ask them the following:
 - (a) "Do you have a plan?" If yes, ask how, with what, where, and when? (Remember talking about suicide does not cause it).
 - (b) "Can you act on the plan now? Are the means available?"
 - (c) "Have you attempted suicide before?" If yes, when, how, with what, and where.
 - (d) "Why now? What problem is your suicide designed to solve?"
 - (e) With whom have you tried to talk about this besides me? Did they listen? Who can be supportive to you right now when you're in so much pain?
 - (f) "When you felt depressed and down before, what kinds of things helped you feel better?" "Would they help now?"
 - (g) "If you choose suicide, there are no other options open to you. The decision can never be reversed. I'm wondering if things are so confusing for you right now that it might not be a good time to make a permanent life/death decision right."
 - (h) Offer hope that alternatives are available. Let them know you care what happens to them. Say something like, "I care what happens to you very much. "I don't want you to die!"
 - (I) Take action. If they are in pain, do not leave them alone. If possible remove the means.

It is important that when dealing with someone who is thinking about suicide that:

- 1) You don't minimize the problem.
- 2) You don't try to argue them out of it.
- 3) You don't tell them "they will feel better tomorrow."
- 4) You don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether their feelings are good or bad. You don't lecture on the value of life.
- 5) You don't ask why. This encourages defensiveness.
- 6) You don't use reverse psychology. You don't tell them to "go ahead and do it" as a way to trick them out of it.
- 7) Never promise to keep the suicide attempt a secret.

There are many things we can say that can be roadblocks to communication when someone is suicidal. Here are a few:

- 1) "That's not a reason to kill yourself."
 - 2) "You shouldn't talk like that."
 - 3) "You will feel different tomorrow."
 - 4) "Just forget about it."
 - 5) "You don't mean that."
 - 6) "It would kill your mother. How could you do that to her?"
 - 7) "Suicide is a sin. It is morally wrong."
 - 8) "Things can't be that bad." "Life's tough. Quit moping around."
- Remember, a person who is thinking about suicide is asking for help and is in need of love and understanding. Give it to them.