

## Suicide

“Razors pain you;  
Rivers are damp;  
Acids stain you;  
And drugs cause cramp.  
Guns aren't lawful;  
Nooses give;  
Gas smells awful;  
You might as well live.“

Dorothy Parker

Suicide is one subject about which most people still have difficulty speaking. It is still unusual for anyone to discuss someone else's suicide rationally. People who **commit suicide** are still **regarded as 'failures'** of some sort or another and suicide is the cause of great sadness and **blame** for the **survivors** of the dead person. This feeling is neither 'natural' nor 'in-born' but is the result of our particular civilisation as it has developed over the last 2000 years.

Suicide in the ancient pre-Christian world, or in modern-day Japan, for example, was clearly connected with **human dignity**. A rational, calm consideration of whether life was **worth living** decided if and when that life was ended. The ancient Roman fell onto his sword to kill himself when living any longer would have meant a **loss** of dignity. The whole **Jewish** town of Massada killed themselves in the first century A.D. **rather than** be taken prisoner by the Roman army. Ritual suicide is still considered socially acceptable and correct in certain situations in Japan even today. Why do we, nowadays, feel so differently about suicide?

**Christianity** taught us that our lives were given to us by God and could only be taken away by God: that they did not belong to us. Suicide was made a criminal act and remained so until very recently and unsuccessful suicides could find themselves in prison for a long time afterwards. **Attempted** suicide and attempted murder were considered to be the same.

Suicide is the fourth most common cause of death In England and in other countries of the Western world it is even higher. Over 3000 people commit suicide in England and Wales every year and these are only a small **fraction** of the number of people who try unsuccessfully to commit suicide—about a twentieth. Of these people who do manage to kill themselves, about 70 % give some kind of warning beforehand: **threats**, letters, indications and **hints**, and we can assume that many people who say they are going to kill themselves are only trying to warn the people around them of their mental condition—they are giving a warning signal, a cry for help.

There are as many reasons for suicide as there are suicides but the main reasons are depression, loneliness, mental illness, personality difficulties, unemployment, a feeling of not **'fitting in'** to the society around you. Interestingly, too, a number of very talented people - **artists, poets, painters, musicians**, etc., have also committed suicide; people such as Jack London, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway and many, many others.

The chances of suicide **increase** with advancing age and in successful attempts men **outnumber** women while in unsuccessful attempts women outnumber men. The number of suicides was steadily rising in England until 1953 when The Samaritans were founded, a group of unpaid, part-time workers who operate a 24-hour centre in most towns in England which people who are thinking of committing suicide can phone for help and advice. The workers there are all **volunteers**, who will listen to you patiently and try to discuss whatever it is that is making you think of killing yourself. If you wish, you can later make contact with the 'Samaritan' at your home, or in a pub or in the centre itself. Thanks to this organisation the number of suicides has been falling regularly since 1953, which seems to prove that they are effective in helping people with the kinds of problems which drive them to this final step. The Samaritans do not put any conditions on the help they give: that they do

not try to judge or **convert** people to their own **beliefs** means that they get people phoning them who would never dream of going to a priest, a psychiatrist or a doctor: at the Samaritans it is simply one person talking to another.

We will, perhaps, never fully understand what brings people to suicide, or why it becomes less or more common. Suicide becomes less **frequent**, for example, during times of war or **crisis**. While deaths and **injuries** caused by terrorist bombs increase in Belfast the suicide rate there **decreases** dramatically. Perhaps we can only agree with a Greek philosopher who said:

“To sleep is good;  
To die is better still;  
Never to have been born—that’s the miracle.”

Michael Caldon

**commit suicide**  
**regard as**  
**failure**  
**blame**  
**survivor**  
**to survive**  
**survival**  
**human dignity**  
**worth doing something**  
**Jewish**  
**loss**  
**rather than**  
**Christianity**  
**to attempt**  
**fraction**  
**threat**  
**hint**  
**fit in**  
**artist**  
**poet**  
**musician**  
**increase**  
**decrease**  
**outnumber**  
**volunteer**  
**to convert**  
**belief**  
**frequent**  
**crisis, crises (pl)**  
**injury, to injure**