

The Secretary Senate Community Affairs Reference Committee

From: David F Keep

I desire to point out that there is a great deal of material available in which suicide is viewed as a somewhat abnormal state, with the origin[s] and treatment very strongly oriented towards a medical /psychiatric problem, often oriented towards a "depressive illness" model, with somewhat vague and uncertain origin.

However, a most interesting and original book entitled "Adolescent Suicide" was written by Jerry Jacobsen and published by Wiley-Interscience in 1961. [Unfortunately it now appears to be out of print, and the copy I used in the State Library of Victoria appears to be missing. I believe the actual research was done in Sydney]

The study compared two groups of adolescents, matched as closely as possible, except for one distinguishing difference. The difference was that one group [31] was made up of completely normal young people, while the other group [50] was made up of those who had made really serious attempts to commit suicide but had been accidentally interrupted just in time, and thereby prevented from doing so.

When a chronological and detailed listing of all the significant events in the life histories of all concerned had been carefully compiled, and the life histories of all the participants compared, a startling fact became apparent.

While all of them had lived a broadly similar pattern of life, with all its "ups and downs" the actual patterns of events was different. Basically speaking, those in the "control" group had experienced a pattern that when one "stressful" event had occurred in their lives, they had had plenty of time to recover from it, and readjust, and continue in a normal way, before the next one came along, with the "suicide attempters" group, "Problem B" had come on top of them before they had had a chance to sort out and recover from "Problem A" and very often Problems C and D" had come upon them as well. In other words one group had been able to cope with one problem at a time, whereas the other group had been forced to cope with several problems almost at the same time and been overloaded and overwhelmed. It should also be noted that problems that appeared not to be overserious to an outside observer often appeared to be very serious indeed to the unfortunate individuals afflicted by them.

I will close by directly quoting from the study itself.

"The process which led to the adolescent suicide attempters progressive isolation from significant others, and finally, to the suicide attempt, is described below. [The reader will recognize this process as the first four points of the outline noted earlier [on pages 27-28 of the book.]

1. A long-standing history of problems, from childhood to the onset of adolescence.
2. A period of "escalation of problems" [since the onset of adolescence, and in excess of those "normally" associated with adolescence.
3. The progressive failure of available adaptive techniques for coping with old and increasing new problems which leads the adolescent to a progressive social isolation from meaningful social relationships.
4. The final phase, characterized by the chain reaction dissolution of any meaningful social relationships in the weeks and days preceding the suicide attempt

It should be noted that the 31 members of the control group were NOT subject to this process.

END OF QUOTE. I hope that this submission will at least go some way towards establishing that suicide is very often not a consequence of straight out depression, or psychiatric illness as such.

For the elderly I would add that the frantic pace of social, political, and economic change, together with the almost complete collapse of the older community-base foundations, and the dread of

becoming elderly, lonely, and unwanted, and finishing in an old people's home, many of which are like dumping grounds, is doubtless a major factor in suicide amongst those of riper years.

All of us wish to go quietly, and with dignity, but despite the fact there is strong public support for euthanasia under appropriate circumstances, all public discussion in the media, and on the internet is actually banned by law!