

## SUICIDE

The natural end of every human life is death. Some people, for reasons that have never been fully understood, choose to end their own lives. This is called suicide, which means literally "self-killing." For all the uncertainty that has surrounded the phenomenon of suicide, his assessment of the problem is probably as accurate as any. The individual, in seemingly hopeless conflict with the world, decides to end his or her existence in what amounts to a final assault against a society that can no longer be tolerated. In so doing, the person tries to obtain a final revenge on everything and everyone that have caused their feelings of depression.

Sometimes suicide has been used as a form of execution. Perhaps the most famous such case is that of the philosopher Socrates, who was required to drink hemlock to end his life in 399 BC, after being found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens. In the 20th century the German general Erwin Rommel took poison rather than be executed for his role in a plot to oust Adolf Hitler from office.

In some societies suicide has had social ties. In Japan, for example, the customs and rules of one's class have demanded suicide under certain circumstances. Called seppuku or popularly known as hara-kiri, which means "self-disembowelment" it has long been viewed as an honorable method of taking one's life. It was used by warriors after losing a battle to avoid the dishonor of defeat. Seppuku was also used as a means of capital punishment to spare warriors the disgrace of execution. In India, widows allowed themselves to be burned to death on their husband's funeral pyre, a practice called suttee.

At least since the 18th century, suicide has been thought of by some as a romantic type of death. This notion led to the belief that some artistic individuals writers, painters, and poets glamorize suicide, thinking that such a death will add to their reputations. The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel 'The Sorrows of Werther' (1774) reinforced this concept and was credited with causing a large number of romantic suicides in Europe. Among well-known artists who killed themselves are Vincent van Gogh, Virginia Woolf, Anne Sexton, Mark Rothko, Jerzy Kosinski, Ernest Hemingway, and Sylvia Plath.

Most suicides in the 20th century occur when the bonds between an individual and society are injured or broken. Some event, or combination of events, puts the person "over the edge". Loss of a job or the death of a friend or relative can start the thoughts of suicide. At the start of the Great Depression, for example, many people who had suddenly lost great wealth killed themselves.

The emotions springing from unfavorable events are hostility, despair, shame, guilt, despondency, and alienation. Focusing on the negative occurrences is what causes the person to commit suicide. The increase in teenage suicides during the 1980s probably resulted from an element of romantic fantasy combined with hostility toward the immediate world. Many suicides result from loss of

boyfriend/girlfriend and from loneliness. Closely related to these emotions is the conviction that the happiness of past years can never be recaptured. Sometimes, terminally ill persons choose to end their lives rather than submit to long, painful declines. In the early 1990s the controversial topic of assisted suicide in which terminally ill people are aided in committing suicide by physicians, loved ones, or other acquaintances was examined as a legal topic. However, voters in Washington state in 1991 rejected a proposition to legalize physician-assisted suicide. Nevertheless, Derek Humphry's book "Final Exit", a guide for terminally ill people who want to commit suicide, became a best-seller that same year.

During wartime, suicide rates drop dramatically. This decline may be related to the turning of aggression toward a common enemy, suggesting that there may be a great deal of aggression that is not known behind the act of suicide.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all condemned suicide as a violation of the law of God. In Europe religious and civil laws were used to combat suicide from the early Middle Ages until the 19th century. After the French Revolution (1789) criminal penalties for attempting suicide were abolished in European countries. Great Britain was the last to abolish its penalties, in 1961.

Prevention of suicide has proved difficult unless an individual demonstrates warning signs. Early recognition and treatment of mental disorders are possible solutions. Since the 1950s suicide-prevention centers have been set up in many countries. They maintain telephone hot lines that desperate or lonely individuals may use to get help.

City dwellers are far more likely to commit suicide than rural people. Laborers are much less likely to commit suicide than business and professional men.

Throughout the world, three or four times as many men as women kill themselves. Male suicides generally hang themselves, or use a knife or a gun. Women often choose poisoning or drug overdose as means of death. Studies have shown that married men and women are less likely to commit suicide.

Year after year, the number has increased during the late spring and early summer.

