

SUICIDE

(Some thoughts on ministry to the despondent)

Earl D. Oliver

Some day, someone we are ministering to may commit suicide. We can do our best to put obstacles in their way and urge them to reconsider, but ultimately we can't stop them. The purpose of this paper is to discuss what we can do to deal with these situations responsibly.

We are living in a climate that is growing more and more accepting of suicide. There are groups like the Hemlock Society that are devoted to persuading people that suicide is an acceptable option. The world is indeed a dark place when voluntary death becomes preferable to life for so many.

We have embraced escape as a strategy for responding to life's many adversities. When people are immersed in despair, they naturally gravitate toward some form of "deliverance." For some they become obsessed with their work, for others it's play. For many they find some relief at the bottom of a bottle or at the end of a needle. Whatever form it takes, it is still escape. The idea is the same, "I don't need this . . . I'm out of here." Suicide is viewed at the ultimate escape.

Most of us think of suicide as immediate, self-inflicted death. (eg. Shooting) We also need to be alert to the long term forms of suicide that have paved the way for social acceptance of suicide as an option. (eg. Alcoholism) Again, despite the form, if it involves even a subtle death wish, it's suicidal.

Over 24% of all people have seriously considered suicide, and over 12% have gained the means of following through. Although more women attempt suicide than men, three times more men succeed. Suicide is becoming increasingly popular among teens, and is a leading cause of death for them. With all the statistics and information that we have available, we still don't have the whole picture. Many who actually kill themselves with medications are labeled victims of heart or respiratory failure. While this may be technically true, it masks the fact that the death was still self induced. As a result, no one is exactly sure how many people are committing suicide each year.

I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES ABOUT SUICIDE

- A. Asking a person if they are considering suicide does not put the thought into their minds.
- B. If they have attempted suicide before, they more than likely will try again.
- C. If they have someone close to them commit suicide, they may try themselves.
- D. The most critical time is the immediate 24 hours after a serious threat. The next

three or four days will still require careful attention.

II. COMMON MOTIVATIONS FOR SUICIDE

- A. *"Rescue Fantasy"* - As mentioned before, suicide is often viewed as the ultimate escape. To someone this desperate and hurting, *RELIEF* is all that matters at the time. This is often the mindset of those with passive personalities.
- B. *"Revenge Fantasy"* - For people who are more dominant or aggressive, the idea of *RETALIATING* against their offender is a common motivation.

III. HOW TO RESPOND?

- A. Don't Teach! - Dictating what is right and what is wrong creates a power struggle that tends to drive them toward destruction. (*Pressure to live is perceived as pressure to die.*)
- B. Be Nervous! - Involvement implies nervousness, *BUT* act in control and try to stay calm. They need to see that you care, but they also need to know that someone is strong enough to handle their situation.
- C. Remain Involved! - They need someone who is warm and caring, calm and demonstrating faith, strong, matter of fact, and not easily intimidated. (cf. I Cor. 16:13-14)

IV. WHAT TO DO?

- A. Get them to talk and keep them talking. As long as they are talking, you have a chance to gain their perspective on the problem(s). Here you have the chance to show understanding and acceptance even if you can't express agreement.
- B. Try to assess the suicide potential.
 - 1. Do they have a specific plan?
 - 2. Are the means for the plan available?
 - 3. Is the plan lethal?
- C. Try to determine what they expect to accomplish with suicide. All behavior is goal oriented (is trying to accomplish or avoid something), so you should try to discover what their goal is.
 - 1. **Rescue Fantasy?** - This is the option people are most aware of. This is

related to some *Dominant Goal* that has been blocked.

2. **Revenge Fantasy?** - People are not usually aware of this motivation, but it is usually in reaction to *Dominant Others* in their life.
3. Help them to see that suicide will not really accomplish much, if any, of what they hope for. Be careful to do this in a sensitive way. We don't want to make them feel like a failure even in this task.

D. Ask them directly to make a verbal commitment not to take their life.

1. Present this in firm and direct terms.
2. Ask them to commit themselves not to harm themselves in any way without first talking with you.
3. Be as complete and detailed as possible.
4. Be aware that later they may test you by asking you to release them from their commitment. You must firmly and lovingly decline, spend time talking with them, and agree on getting help as soon as possible.
5. Try to get someone else to spend the next 24 hours with them.
6. Get them into counseling within 24 hours.
7. Get them to hand over their means of suicide.

E. CONCLUSIONS

1. If they begin to see the sinfulness of their self-protection, and learn how they can repent and change, they can gain hope.
2. If they resist all your efforts or won't make a commitment, you have an obligation to do whatever you can to stop them. This may include calling the police, telling them where the person is, and meeting them there.