

“We are each born to make a unique contribution to society”

# Understanding suicide from a new perspective

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**Debates on suicide wage on our screens and in newsprint daily, yet suicide is still largely veiled in mystery, shrouded in stigma and laced with shame.**

The fact remains that suicide is thriving among us. One million people approximately take their lives worldwide every year.

In Ireland, recorded suicides between 2000 and 2011 totalled 5,979 and confirmed suicide rates appear to be escalating. Up until now the reasons put forward for suicide have focused almost exclusively on individuals as if they were somehow flawed. Our book, *Understanding Suicide*, refutes this. If we adopt a broader view of suicide, as the extreme act on a spectrum of unnecessary human pain, we begin to see how society fosters unfairness and inequality by its structures and renders some individual characteristics, skills, and abilities more favoured than others. This results in marginalising those who cannot effectively contribute to society's structured needs that are economically driven to favour an advantaged minority.

To move our stagnated debates forward then, and much more importantly, to reduce suicide, we need to change our implied assertions that the individual is somehow flawed within a naturally developed society, to the opposing view that society is flawed, by demanding that individuals fit into its limited parameters. Global research in the areas of socialisation, mental health and suicide indicate a need for sweeping social change that supports the assertions in our book, yet sadly many of these proposals have never been implemented. This highlights

the reluctance for change in spite of the overwhelming unnecessary pain experienced by so many among us. A collective selective blindness ensures that the denial remains steadfast.

## THE SUICIDE BOX

We are each stuck in a box – a suicide box that keeps us blinkered from recognising society's defective and limited view of the full spectrum of human pain that includes suicide. This view, that also curtails individual expression, has been fostered throughout history by various social institutions including politics and economics, religions, the law, education, work, mental health, the family and the media.

Suicide is the most extreme manifestation of pain that a human being can ever express. Although individual reasons may be infinite, the deep-rooted causes lie deep within society's beliefs and practices that are reflected and personified within the Suicide Box. Due to socialisation, most of us unconsciously accept that society's accepted norms are truths, and that failure to fit in with these identifies an individual as flawed or inferior in some way. When people feel that they have to hide their true identity because they don't fit into society, suicide may become an option to take away the pain of isolation.

## THE POWER OF SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The power and influence of social structures to shape and mould our beliefs about ourselves, our feelings about our level of self-worth, and our actual experience of wellbeing or pain is all too often shoved to the background in discussions about suicide. The reality is that these institutions constrict and limit countless

individuals who do not, or cannot, meet society's requirements. A glaring example is education: Far from educating children to be true to themselves and to reach their highest potential, schools – as the servant of society – only rewards those who maintain its dysfunctional system. There is no attempt to teach critical thinking skills. Intellectual intelligence is prized far above other intelligences, and specific learning styles are primarily used to teach that suit those who are gifted in the favoured and narrow intellectual intelligence. There are also the elements of excessive levels of stress, constant competition that is fostered between students; and the appalling effects of bullying that still remains a constant scourge in our schools.

Our educational system is focused on a narrow intellectual intelligence with the aim of supplying a jobs' market to keep the economic world abounding. This is to the detriment of individual human development of which intellectual intelligence is only a tiny part. We are creative beings, social beings, psychological beings, cultural beings, conscious beings, etc. However, of most concern here is a dimension that separates us profoundly from all other species on the planet: our emotional selves. This is the dimension that, when ignored or suppressed, produces the mountain of unnecessary pain that results in self-harm and suicide, where a person is so full of pain, confusion and hopelessness that he or she attacks the self. Yet, our schools largely ignore this vital component of what it means to be human. Those who feel excessive pain because they can't fit into such a system may become depressed, alcoholic,

turn to self-harm or suicide. When this occurs, society has failed them. In fact, we have all failed them.

We are each born to make a unique contribution to society. Instead, we are raised in a pre-ordered societal structure into which we are expected to comply with rigid requirements. The unique mix of natural abilities that we each possess are prejudged by external structures, and values are positioned on a sliding scale, according to what contribution we can make to essentially enhance the political and commercial landscape. Another essential feature is that within our society, this status quo must be maintained and reinforced. The main thrust of progress is to keep the wealth pyramid intact and increasing so that the effects of progress will be felt all the way to the bottom in the same way as a rising tide raises all boats. There is no attempt to achieve a fair and equitable society.

## WAITING AT THE CLIFF-TOP

The fact remains that most explanations for suicide are focused on the individual. All our myths and stigma about suicide and mental health have built up over centuries and have kept us locked in to a mind-set that blinds us to anything outside of this tiny circle of whys. Thus, as a society we wait on the cliff-top with the hope of preventing suicide when someone arrives to take their life. However, few look at the person's journey to the cliff-top. We now know the effects a traumatic childhood has on a person's life. We are not raised in a vacuum. However unwittingly that the emotional damage is done, we each - as part of society - have to share in the responsibility for accepting institutions that allow bullying, abuse, stereo-

typing of marginalised groups, etc. to continue, and in so doing to facilitate and enable self-harm and suicide.

There are too many people among us who feel so much pain that they need to end their lives. Far from seeing this need for suicide as an individual flaw, our book looks at the narrow parameters within society that make it too difficult for many of our beautiful people to feel they belong. It is therefore our society that needs to change.

## A NEW PERSPECTIVE

In *Understanding Suicide* we offer readers a new perspective for understanding suicide, and outline a blueprint for education, familial and social interactions, where the importance of emotional expression and the embracing of human diversity in all its forms are championed. We propose a new perspective that instils hope, facilitates positive change and allows for the development of an authentic self that more closely represents our intended calling in life. Much change however requires an attitudinal shift at institutional, community and individual levels. It does not require vast sums of money to fund it, as has been the only top-down response in the past. It is an attitudinal shift in our thinking and feeling that must form the vital basis for change before any other tangible transformation change takes place.

Along with all those who champion programmes and strategies to lessen suicide and all unnecessary human pain, we welcome the government's recent announcement to implement a National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (2015-2020). The document, *Connecting for Life*, states that: Since suicide is a 'whole-of-society' issue, we're taking

a 'whole-of-government' approach. The report then goes on to highlight areas within state departments, the community and direct services where suicide prevention and awareness-education will be developed. All this is admirable and much needed, yet, must be taken with a note of caution.

Before we can bring any change to the numbers of people who self-harm and suicide in Ireland, we must firstly understand why many of our citizens are in so much pain that they want to end their lives. The source of all this pain must be located before any real change can ever occur. It becomes obvious when we look at the dysfunctionality of our state institutions. Our elected government officials often profess to strive for positive humanitarian change prior to election but invariably face towards the fiscal world when in positions of power. Maintaining the status quo with all its blatant inequalities and unfairness seems to be the sole aim. If we choose to maintain the present dysfunctional society that facilitates and enables suicide then we can learn to live with the collateral damage of depression, self-harm and suicide.

There is always hope, and there is certainly a need for hope. Hope for society lies in our ability to develop our capacity for true compassion and empathy, to adapt to humanitarian change that will undoubtedly reduce unnecessary pain, save many precious people and allow people to achieve their true calling and happy full lives.

*Lucy Costigan and Anthony E. Walsh are authors of *Understanding Suicide: Exposing the world of pain within the Suicide Box*, published by Currach Press, June, 2015.*