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Suicide: What You Should Know, How You Should Relate by J Cushman

Lately, Cindy has been acting strange. A second-year medical student from Japan, she is hard-working and highly motivated. Sometimes it's not clear whether she is training to be a doctor for herself or for her parents. Her parents have everything mapped out for her life, including her future husband. They have high expectations for her. She dare not disappoint them. Last quarter she scored average in her classes, but this quarter trouble looms ahead. In fact last week she flunked an important chemistry test. And then came the blow: a letter from her fiance that he has found someone else; he couldn't wait for her to finish medicine.

Cindy seems to have lost interest in everything. Her behavior is erratic. She hardly sleeps. She hardly eats. Once a happy, bouncy person, suddenly she has turned inward. She avoids friends. She says it would be better if she weren't around. But she won't talk about what's hurting her. Last night she gave away her favorite dress, saying she won't be needing it any more. Cindy is in trouble. She is giving out warning signals, signals that could well lead to the infamous escape route that people in trouble resort to--suicide.

A global tragedy

Suicide is one of the great tragedies of life. From the biblical examples of Saul and Judas to the latest cases in today's newspaper, "suicide touches every socioeconomic strata, every age group, all educational levels, every profession, all religions and both genders."

Suicide is a global, growing problem. In the United States, among 15 to 24 year olds, suicide registered an increase of 202 percent between 1950 and 1990. In Japan and Denmark, one out of three males and one out of four females in the age group of 25 to 34 commit suicide. Quebec province in Canada has had an increase of 800 percent in suicide in the 15 to 24 age group from 1961 to 1981. Finland has the highest suicide rate in Europe.

A 1977 study revealed that as many as 50 to 60 may attempt suicide for each completed suicide. Among students "an equal percentage of males and females experienced suicidal thoughts and, on the average, did so at the same levels of intensity."

Why suicide? Why do people commit suicide? Does the problem lie with the suicidal person, the society, or a combination of the individual and the environment? So far as the individual is concerned, the problem often is his or her striving to reach a high goal and the failure to achieve that goal.

Depression is another common cause of suicide. Very little work has been done on anger and its relationship to suicide, but it seems to be a significant factor. "The suicidal

person saves up angry feelings in the same manner that other individuals collect trading stamps. Because they never fight with others (or at least wait until the last few days before the attempt), they generally end up fighting themselves."

Family background plays a vital role in overcoming or succumbing to suicidal tendencies. Among college students who thought of, attempted, or completed suicide, "a common characteristic is a disruptive (families that have experienced divorce, separation, death of a parent, or remarriage, or a single parent) and chaotic family environment."

Pressure to perform well in studies and failure in romance also play a role in suicidal behavior among students. "More than 90% of the students who attempted suicide had experienced a failure in work or school. The next most common problem was difficulty in a romantic relationship."

Lack of social support is another explanation for high incidence of suicides among college students. Social support, in the form of family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and church members, "promotes mental health and buffers psychological stress." Studies have shown that religion has a direct impact on whether a person is tempted to commit suicide.

Faith in anything, especially in God, gives people that extra strength to cope with stress. At the same time "being too immersed in the religious life (such as in the case of cults) makes one subject to overregulation and thus more prone to commit fatalistic suicide." While strong faith in religion may protect us from pressures of stress, the tendency toward legalism and perfectionism may open the possibility of breaking down under pressure. The key is balance. While Christ can, and should, be involved in every area of our lives, Christ and religious activities are not always the same.

Prevention of suicide

If you think a friend or acquaintance is considering suicide, here are some immediate steps you can take to help:

- Ask the person if he or she is suicidal.
- Get the person to talk about his or her plans.
- Try to eliminate the means for carrying out such a suicide plan.
- Encourage the person to get in touch with a suicide prevention center or a crisis hotline. Provide phone numbers.
- Get the person to make a verbal agreement or a written contract with you stating that he or she will not attempt suicide without calling you.
- If possible, remove the problem that is causing the person to feel suicidal.
- Stay with the person who is suicidal or arrange with someone to stay until the crisis is over.
- Encourage the person to get professional counseling; offer to accompany him or her.

What should be a person's attitude regarding suicide? Scriptures record instances of suicide, two of which involve men in leadership. First, the story of King Saul. Saul had been slowly turning away from God. In 1 Samuel 31, he is watching with horror as Israel is losing a vital battle and three of his sons lay dead. Then he is wounded and knows there is no way of escape. He asks his armor bearer to kill him, but the man refuses.

Saul chooses to fall on his own sword, rather than be captured by the enemy. Apparently suicide was more honorable than captivity.

The second example of suicide mentioned in the Bible is Judas. Jesus warned Judas that he was headed for trouble (Matthew 26:23-25), but Judas believed he was doing the right thing by betraying Jesus. Not until he saw his plan totally falling apart (Matthew 27:3-5) did he realize life was too embarrassing to live. Jesus knew what Judas was planning, yet he "spoke no word of condemnation. He looked pityingly upon Judas and said, For this hour came I into the world." If Jesus, knowing human hearts, can continue to work with people without condemnation, can we be any different?

From these biblical cases, we can discern that the real issue is the pattern of one's life. All people are given the opportunity to know God. Then they must decide what they will do with that knowledge. Those that reject Him and His values often feel life is not worth living and want to end their lives. However, not all suicide involves the rejection of God. There are other factors over which one loses control: stress, loneliness, betrayal, shame, depression, mental illness, terminal diseases.

While we may not fully understand the causes and motivations behind suicide, we can affirm three important principles. First, life is precious and is a gift of God, to be lived by His grace through faith. No problem is too big to be brought to God in prayer. Second, when we find a person with thoughts of self-destruction, we have a duty to minister to that person. Third, judgment is not ours. While we are to extend ministry of love and tenderness to those involved, we are not to pass judgment that one has committed the ultimate sin.