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First person

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Using the web to turn lives around

World Suicide Prevention Day, co-sponsored by the World Health Organization, takes place on September 10. Montreal artist and Guardian Weekly reader Kenneth Hemmerick describes the experiences that led to him setting up a website devoted to helping those in need

Kenneth Hemmerick
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Anonymous man talking on the phone. Photograph: Linda Ny Lind

In 1998, I created the [Suicide Prevention Help website](#), on which I share my experiences of suicidal thoughts and feelings, and how I came to see and cope with these powerful urges objectively. I was motivated to publish the site, which contains my "friendship letter" to readers, because I was shocked to find websites that encourage people to kill themselves.

Over the years, I have answered thousands of letters from people of all ages and circumstances, including, for example: young people being bullied in school; teens dealing with their emerging sexuality or peer and family relationships; spouses going through the throes of divorce; individuals experiencing financial or health setbacks; or senior citizens who are housebound and lonely, because they have not heard from their children for years. Each of their stories is heartwrenching and I have offered resources online and offline that hopefully help them in their particular situation.

Some of the stories I hear have come from people whom I would not have expected to write. For example, Lorne [name changed], a missionary in the Far East, wrote to tell me about the severe depression he had been suffering from, which had been exacerbated by the absence of his young family who were out of the country on holidays. Or Rhonda, the nurse who wrote: "Most people would not believe that I am suicidal. I

just keep a cheerful face, but inside I am crying all the time."

Then there is Avi, a young man in Israel who was dreading completing his service in the army because he was frightened "to death" of the possibility of killing someone – even in self-defense. Then there was Hanan, the young Muslim woman living in Saudi Arabia, who was struggling with her beliefs and family and was seriously considering killing herself as a way out of her difficulties.

I have come to appreciate that for those who are experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings, there is often a lack of kindness in their lives – frequently there is an overabundance of cruelty in their experience. Often we hear reports in the media of people who have killed themselves. Yet we do not hear of the agony, shame and stigma people feel when they are despairing and contemplating the act. Sadly, mental health and mental health issues are still taboo, thus making it difficult for many to seek help.

I had had suicidal feelings from an early age, and as a young child I tried to hang myself. I grew up believing that I was neither wanted nor loved and that I was essentially not loveable. In my teens and into adulthood I struggled with depression and suicidal feelings.

I again tried to kill myself, taking a massive overdose, and almost lost my leg through dehydration as I was found unconscious only after two days. But this did not end my suicidal feelings. Fortunately, I had a good psychiatrist who helped me deal with childhood issues, such as being given up at birth or being raised in orphanages and foster homes, or being subjected to physical and mental abuse.

At the time I was also dealing with the dissolution of my 10-year marriage and my sexuality. During this period I was told, mistakenly by my physician, that I had Aids. At one point, I was determined to throw myself off a bridge but was spotted by a policeman who stopped and asked if I was OK. I told him I was a "bit down" and he offered to take me out for a cup of coffee. I was so embarrassed that I told him I would just go home. He slowly followed me as I walked home. I was then a chief executive of an NGO and feared that this information would get out.

Even though I was determined to deal with the root causes of my suicidal depression through reading self-help and psychology texts, taking personal development workshops, and being very present in my psychotherapy, I could not get rid of the deep despair I was experiencing.

Once, tired of "complaining" to my therapist and close friends, I took a video camera and videotaped talking to myself as if I was a dear friend. Then I watched the video without sound to observe my body language, and made another video talking to "that person" who was so sad and truly needed a friend. This process led me to see myself with a more compassion and self-love.

Another time, when the self-loathing was particularly profound, I decided to work on an artwork of acrylic and gels. After I completed a layer, I would apply a glaze gel and decided that I would wait for the gel to dry before coming to a final decision to kill myself. Over time this painting had many, many layers and weighed quite a bit, but it enabled me to take the time needed for the waves of suicidal despair to subside.

According to the [World Health Organization](#), in the last 45 years suicide rates have increased by 60% worldwide. Suicide is now among the three leading causes of death among those aged 15-44 years (both sexes). In the year 2000, the WHO says approximately one million people died from suicide: a global mortality rate of 16 per 100,000, or one death every 40 seconds.

on family members, colleagues and friends. The survivors of suicide go through excruciating grief, and struggle hard to come to terms with their loss.

I am amazed at the number of people who have come forward to tell me of their experiences of a family member who has died in this way. The striking singularity of these conversations is that years after the family member's death, one can still hear the pain of what those left behind experience. I do not think this agony ever goes away entirely. It may abate, but the questioning and self-doubt are never far from the surface.

My first personal experience with someone else's suicide was when I was in my early twenties. An accountant in my office had killed himself, leaving a young family. I was shocked and deeply saddened. Many years later, after I had published *The Friendship Letter*, I saw a young teen kill himself in the subway. In this case I was as profoundly shaken as if he had been my own son. However, it was the suicide of a friend's brother, whom I had known vicariously, that encouraged me to do everything possible to raise awareness of suicide prevention.

I encourage readers who are confronted with a situation where someone shares their suicidal feelings, to please take them seriously, and to offer a kind and generous ear.

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