

Suicide Prevention Help – *the friendship letter*

By Kenneth Hemmerick

Dear Friend:

My name is Kenneth. If a friend confided in you with her or his suicidal thoughts and feelings, I am sure you would listen out of friendship, and help your friend to see the suicidal thoughts and feelings more realistically. It is this same sense of friendship that has motivated me to prepare this material for you.

I am not a trained psychologist, but I do have a past history of suicidal thoughts, feelings and attempts. I am 51 years of age. Over 20 years ago, I took 120 pills all at once because I believed I was not able to carry on. Two days after taking the overdose, I was discovered unconscious and close to death. Through the brilliant and dedicated efforts of the hospital staff, I survived.

In the days following my survival, I realized that I would have to look at the underlying causes of my recurring suicidal thoughts and feelings. With time, I began to recognize that I had my first suicidal thoughts and feelings as a young child. Throughout my youth, adolescence, and early adulthood, suicide was always a viable option and one considered seriously.

Over 20 years after this near-fatal suicide attempt, I am glad that I found the courage to live and address the many reasons why I was suicidal and depressed. I fortunately had the help of others- friends, family members and a wise psychotherapist.

Over 20 years ago, the future looked too difficult and painful to endure. I can honestly say these past years were not always easy; but looking back, they have also been better than anything I could have imagined.

HERE IS THE GOOD NEWS:

Somehow, I seem to have had the strength to handle situations and issues that were making me very sad, afraid, angry, lonely and hopeless. Even though, at the time, I did not believe I had the will or strength.

In sharing my experience and insights with you, I hope you will take this opportunity to see if any part of my experience is similar to yours and if there are any insights which you can take and apply to yourself -especially when experiencing the powerful and convincing impulse to commit suicide.

People who are genuinely happy rarely commit suicide. Yet oddly enough, many people who commit suicide often appear to be happy. But this happiness is usually a mask that hides a depression, and this depression causes great mental and physical pain.

Usually suicidal thoughts and feelings result from depression.

IF YOU SUSPECT THAT DEPRESSION IS PLAYING A KEY ROLE IN YOUR SUICIDAL IMPULSES, there are many effective psychotherapeutic techniques and medications which HELP relieve the excruciating pain of the horrible disease called depression. **If you believe you are depressed, consult a medical professional without delay.**

YOU CAN BE HELPED!

The following is not a replacement or substitute for professional counselling. It is designed to share personal experience and insight. In writing this letter, I offer you a beacon of hope without your having to resort to belief or faith.

My hope is that, after reading the following, you will be empowered to see your suicidal impulses with a bit more objectivity and understanding. With this understanding, you will develop a deeper appreciation of the nature of your own thinking and experience.

I have found that in the past, when I had suicidal thoughts and feelings, they became MORE REALISTIC AND REAL every time I dwelt on them; and the more I dwelt on these thoughts and feelings, the more I was "trapped" in their relentless grip.

Suicidal thoughts and feelings are extremely painful and take up a lot of energy. This can leave one feeling further drained and depressed and, as such, further committed to the idea of suicide.

It is a mistake to believe that because one is suicidal that one is also psychologically or emotionally deficient. Many intelligent, caring people have come close to having a brush with death as a result of these thoughts and feelings.

At one point in my life, I believed that my having suicidal thoughts and feelings meant I wanted to die or I didn't want to live. Later I came to see that my having suicidal thoughts and feelings meant I was not getting the full picture of my experience and I had been dwelling on only one aspect of my thoughts and feelings (my suicidal ones) to the exclusion of virtually everything else.

A snapshot of my thoughts and feelings, while I was depressed and suicidal, shows the theme of my suicidal impulses. The basic thoughts and feelings were:

- **I should kill myself**
- **I know how I am going to do it**
- **If I kill myself all my problems will go away and I will have a fresh start**
- **Nobody will miss me**
- **I am just better off dead.**

Sometimes I would dwell on, let's say, the idea of "nobody will miss me" and then dwell upon the belief that "I am better off dead". Then, I would think over and over again about

how I would kill myself, and then back again to believing nobody would miss me if I were dead.

It is as if suicidal thoughts and feelings can suck us in and keep us thinking more suicidal thoughts and feelings for hours, days, months and years, with little or no relief.

Sometimes I have even asked the difficult question over and over again, why? Or the even more difficult question, why me? I have found that trying to analyze these and other similar questions in order to gain understanding is virtually impossible, and essentially a waste of time and effort. For the real issue is not about morality, karma, God, or whether people who feel depressed and suicidal deserve this miserable pain.

The issue is about how to handle one's suicidal and depressing thoughts and feelings without being pulled into the vortex or center of their storm.

Although I was receiving considerable support from my therapist and others, I wanted further information, knowledge and understanding. What did I do? I went to the bookstore and discovered the vast world of self-help, personal development and psychological support. I was amazed to discover the many, possibly hundreds of books which all seemed to have, or purported to have, THE ANSWER.

I was rightfully confused.

I was overwhelmed and very depressed by the question that, if so many people have the answer, why are there so many unhappy people? Oddly enough, I was so depressed by the decision I had to make in choosing a book, that I found myself feeling extremely suicidal once again.

Standing in front of the self-help section of the bookstore, my thinking went something like this:

- **I should kill myself.** I will never be able to find a book that will help.
- **I know how I am going to do it.** If God loved people, He surely wouldn't make life so difficult.
- **If I kill myself all my problems will go away and I will have a fresh start.** Solving my problems seems impossible; I'll never figure it out.
- **Nobody will miss me.** I can't even choose a simple book.
- **I am just better off dead.** All these so-called experts just don't understand how bad I feel.

Fortunately, something happened! A voice came over the P.A. system and I was jarred out of my suicidal thoughts and feelings. I quickly chose a book about depression and brought it home and began to read.

After I read the book, I bought and read another and then another and another until I had read every single book I could find, which related to my sadness, grief, disappointment, anger, rage, and utter loss of faith in myself and my ability to be happy ever again.

I read over 100 books and articles. I remember thinking, after this serious reading, that if I could find the **common denominator** of all these books, theories and teachings, then I would have a possible key to addressing, effectively, the underlying causes of my depression and suicidal feelings.

And so, methodically, I went through the books and articles I had read to find some common thread.

I discovered all the teachings at one point referred to: jotting down thoughts as they come, meditating, prayer, relaxing, contemplating or watching one's breath or listening to one's heartbeat. Often they suggested, as fundamental to the success of their various techniques to **regularly take some time each and every day to simply listen to yourself, and your thoughts and feelings.**

In time, I began to **listen regularly** to my thoughts and feelings; ESPECIALLY WHEN I was feeling suicidal. Eventually, I discovered that when I was depressed and suicidal, I was only tuning into one very limited aspect of my experience - my depressed and suicidal thoughts. However, through listening to myself, I was able to hear and identify other thoughts and feelings.

Some of these thoughts and feelings were profound and self-loving and as such, highly useful.

For example:

- I should kill myself. **I have tried the best I could but it never seems to work out. I have tried all my life to be a good person and I know I am a good person.** If they just knew how bad I am feeling, they would understand.
- I know how I am going to do it. Why was I treated the way I was treated? Nobody seems to understand. It seems that people who don't care don't get hurt. **I care. I care a lot about people. I even care about animals.** My stomach is rumbling. I hardly have enough energy to eat.
- If I kill myself all my problems will go away and I will have a fresh start. **I love myself** but I feel like I can't go on. **I have had some good times though.** But they seem so far away right now. Nothing ever works. I've failed. I'm no good.
- Nobody will miss me. Something must be wrong with me. Nobody else feels this way. I seem to have to work so hard just to be happy when for others, happiness comes so easily. **I know that if I had the chance, I could figure it out.** But I am just so worn out and tired.
- I am just better off dead. Anything must be better than this. I really need someone to talk to. **I wonder whom I can call?** I just feel so lonely. I wish someone could just hold me.

Of course, I had many more thoughts and feelings sandwiched in between the depressed and suicidal ones. But the little example that I outlined above shows some of the positive, life supporting thoughts and feelings I had:

- **I have tried all my life to be a good person and I know I am a good person.**
- **I care. I care a lot about people.**
- **I even care about animals.**
- **I love myself.**
- **I have had some good times, though.**
- **I know that if I had the chance, I could figure it out.**
- **I wonder who I can call?**

When I began to listen to a **BIGGER PICTURE** of the thoughts and feelings I was having, I was able to see my suicidal and depressed thoughts, objectively, in the company of other thoughts and feelings. As a result of this increase in self-awareness or understanding, it seemed as if the magnetism or pull of the depressing and suicidal thoughts and feelings was not as strong.

These painful thoughts and feelings were being "diluted" by an awareness of other (life-supporting) thoughts and feelings.

Gradually, I began to have some hope for the future, a little peace in the present and more understanding of the past. I have found that if I keep repeating something to myself, then my mood gradually becomes affected by what I am saying.

For example, if I keep saying to myself: War. Famine. Crime. Murder. Pain. Suffering. Unemployment. The Homeless - then after a time, I begin to feel depressed and hopeless about all the problems in the world.

By the same token if I repeat words like KINDNESS. GOODWILL. COMPASSION. LOVE. TOLERANCE. PEACE. GENTLENESS - then after just even a few seconds, I start to feel a bit more positive and cheerful and sometimes, people who emulate these qualities come to mind and the whole planet seems less of a cruel, heartless world.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to speak with many people who have felt depressed and suicidal. I have never met anyone who usually enjoyed feeling this way.

But I have even been told that people who are feeling suicidal and depressed feelings are "just that way because they want sympathy" and that "all they need is a good kick in the butt to stop them from feeling sorry for themselves."

These statements are sometimes made in an attempt to shock one out of a depressed or suicidal state. However, I have found in the past, these and other similar statements have only led me to feel even more worthless and incapable of breaking through my suffering.

Years ago, a good friend of mine told me that when one is feeling depressed and suicidal, more often than not, insight vanishes and one begins to believe that the pain

and suffering will continue for ever. This friend was right. At one point in my life, I believed I was doomed to suffer forever.

From experience I can tell you honestly, **The pain and suffering do pass away with time.** I find that simply being aware of what it is that I think and feel (without feeling bad about myself because I think or feel as I do) plays a significant role in my increasing happiness.

One of the most interesting things I have learned about thoughts and feelings is that they, by themselves, are neither good nor bad. I discovered, I do not have to act on all the thoughts and feelings which I may have.

One person may think, "I feel like eating a big piece of chocolate cake," and chooses not to eat the cake because he or she has diabetes. Another person who is also diabetic may have the idea and chooses to eat the cake despite the medical condition. In both cases, the thought or feeling to have a big piece of chocolate cake was the same. **The decision to act on the thought or feeling was different.**

In the same way, when it comes to suicidal thoughts and feelings we can listen to them (often they seem to have a way of making themselves heard), but as humans, we have the ability to realize that our painful thoughts and feelings mean that we are experiencing pain.

Sometimes painful feelings surface as thoughts different from their original cause. In the same way, a very bad toothache can make us snappy or miserable to a loved one whom we would never ever want to hurt.

I have created this letter because of all the help I have received over the years. I want to give back something and help others. As I said previously, in the past, I suffered with my suicidal thoughts and feelings. Today these thoughts and feelings are no longer a reality in my life.

In sharing my experience with you, **I hope you can see that It is very possible and likely, that one day, (maybe today!)** you will begin to feel a bit more hopeful about your situation and not feel so bad.

I hope you can see the amount of care I have put into this writing because I intuitively feel there is probably a lot about you that is unique, talented, special, of great value and worth caring about.

I am sure, if you and I had the opportunity to talk and you told me your life story, there would be a lot that I COULD LEARN FROM YOU. You probably have handled situations and issues that were extremely difficult and yet you managed to deal with them with a bit of class, courage and sense of humour.

When I was feeling very down, and hopeless and powerless, it was good to hear some encouraging words from someone who truly cared. Even though, at first, I did not believe or trust the words, caring or kindness of the person who was helping me.

I have found that true kindness, regardless of how I felt or what I believed at the time, always helped to relieve my horrible pain. You may believe, at this time, nobody would want to help you. I can say, from experience, there are many people who are willing to lend a gentle, caring hand. **ALL YOU NEED TO DO IS ASK FOR HELP.**

If you cannot think of anyone, please **CALL A CRISIS OR SUICIDE PREVENTION CENTER** or dial **911** - (see www.suicidehotlines.com)

These kind, dedicated and trained people will help you because they genuinely understand. You are not alone; and **YES, YOU DO HAVE A FRIEND!** When I was feeling bad and needed their help, **THEY HELPED ME A LOT.**

Love from Kenneth

SOME HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS IF YOU FIND YOURSELF CAUGHT IN THE STORM OF SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS:

- **CONTACT** a crisis or suicide prevention center (see www.suicidehotlines.com) or a trusted friend, social worker or clergy and
- **TALK.** They will not think something is wrong with you or that you are "weird" or "crazy".
- **SHARE** your suicidal thoughts and feelings, fears, anger, disappointment and sorrow.
- **BE ACTIVE.** Go for a walk and get some exercise. Often depressing and suicidal thoughts and feelings fade when something or someone else stimulates us.
- **DO SOMETHING** - anything. It does not have to be a HUGE project - but a little project LIKE TIDYING UP a counter or small cupboard. Remember to **PRAISE YOURSELF** for the work you have done.
- **START A CREATIVE PROJECT** in art, gardening, music, crafts, writing etc. Don't worry if your project is not a masterpiece. Many people have found when they are working on creative projects, they forget their painful suffering.
- Find someone or an animal or plant who could **USE YOUR LOVE AND CARE.**
- **REMEMBER** that along with your suicidal thoughts and feelings, **you are having other thoughts and feelings that are not suicidal.**
- **LISTEN** to your thoughts and feelings without analyzing them, letting them come and go **WITHOUT** dwelling on them.

- **IDENTIFY and ACKNOWLEDGE** other thoughts and feeling that are not suicidal.
- **READ** this friendship letter over again.
- **REMEMBER** that you have experienced times in your life **when you did not have suicidal thoughts and feelings** because you were not depressed but were hopeful at the time.
- **REMEMBER** times in which you may have felt strong suicidal thoughts and feelings that eventually passed into times of other thoughts and feelings which were not depressing but WERE HOPEFUL and **you were able to look forward.**
- **ACKNOWLEDGE** for yourself that having suicidal thoughts in the midst of other thoughts is emotionally draining and that **you have shown incredible strength in remaining alive and staying alive in spite of the powerful suicidal thoughts and feelings that you may have.**
- In the same way that you do not believe or act upon all the thoughts and feelings that you may have, **REMEMBER** that just because you may have a suicidal thought or feeling, **you do not have to believe or act upon the thought or feeling.**

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