

Pa232 Counseling

Lesson Pa232-37 Grief: Self-inflicted Harm

If you have never gotten really depressed, it is hard to understand how people can feel bad enough to harm themselves. We hear it in the news; we hear it in the Bible too.

At the time David was king over Israel one of his favorite sons, Absalom, “stole the hearts of the people” (2Sam 15:6). Then he rose up to challenge his father’s rule over Israel and proclaimed himself king. David became aware of the conspiracy. Absalom had sent for David’s counselor, Ahithophel, to conspire with him. So David prayed that God would “turn Ahithophel’s counsel into foolishness” (2Sam 15:31). David fled the city quickly, with his household and his fighting men. He also sent his confidant, Hushai, back into the city to report what was happening.

Absalom and his men soon took over Jerusalem. Ahithophel’s counsel to Absalom was, “I would choose 12,000 men and set out tonight in pursuit of David. I would attack him while he is weary and weak. I would strike him with terror, and then all the people with him will flee. I would strike down only the king and bring all the people back to you” (2Sam 17:1-3). But Absalom called for Hushai and asked for his opinion too. Hushai told Absalom that he would find disaster and not success if he followed Ahithophel’s counsel. So Absalom and all the men of Israel followed Hushai’s advice, not that of Ahithophel. This was God’s plan.

When Ahithophel discovered his advice had been rejected, he may have reasoned that before long David would learn of his betrayal. To escape possible future pain, he made this decision: “He saddled his donkey and set out for his house in his hometown. He put his house in order and then hanged himself. So he died and was buried in his father’s tomb” (2Sam. 17:5-23).

A study was made of hundreds of suicide notes and interviews with those who had attempted suicide and had failed to complete it. Here are seven of the reasons given for wanting to end their lives:

- Suicide would end their pain now and allow them to escape future pain.
- Ending life was a reaction to the loss of a loved one, a job, one’s health, or one’s reputation.
- Their death was meant to hurt someone who had hurt them or who was planning to hurt them.
- Suicide was an attempt to control someone else’s behavior, for example, “If you leave me, I will kill myself....”
- The person wanted to see how suicide feels; they have had a break with reality—a delusion.
- The death was accidental. They wanted to reconsider but it was too late.
- Some were just hastening a pending painful death from cancer or disease—not uncommon.

Every living person has particular needs. When a barrier comes between a need and its fulfillment, people try to go around the barrier or take it down. If all else fails, a person may try to just escape. This escape can show itself in risky behavior, such as substance abuse, strange treatment of themselves, others, or animals. The least costly options are tried first: restless wandering, insomnia, or counseling. When such options fail, a person resorts to more expensive ways out, such as violent outbursts, drinking, obsessions, anger, and depression.

Finally the person exits life, attempting to stop the unbearable anguish or intolerable emotion they are feeling. Suicide is *not* the first choice. It is an emotional decision. Be assured emotions can and do change quickly and often. That is where the counselor can lend support. Every suicide is logical to the one who decides to take this route. It is bad logic and sadly leads to only one outcome. What is happening with such an individual is:

1. They suffer unendurable mental pain, saying, "I can go no further."
2. They seek a way to stop the conscious pain. Getting upset over even small things is critical at this point, especially if there is something lethal available.
3. They feel helpless and hopeless. They think, "There is nothing I can do; no one can help me."
4. They want to escape and want to live as well. Some 80% of suicide victims communicate their intention to friends or family, hoping somehow for intervention.

Example: "A young man received a disappointing midterm grade and suffered a broken relationship. After saying he intended to go home that weekend to take his life, he disappeared. Friends searched the campus for him. After giving up, they found him back in his room, calm and making jokes. So they didn't worry anymore. Neither did they tell anyone about the incident. If only they had known better! It is not uncommon that once a suicide plan has been made, one finally feels peace."

5. The person's focus narrows until they can no longer even include loved ones in their thinking or planning.
6. At some point the person loses rational thinking. However, if their attempt fails, they will be glad it did not happen.

Knowing the way a depressed person thinks will help you in counseling. This applies to those who may be considering self-inflicted harm or have survived a suicide attempt. Death is not the only answer to a person's problems. It is helpful in any situation to first understand what has happened. You must disregard things that did not happen. It is easier to work with facts than fiction.

When dealing with family or friends of a suicide victim, provide them a safe non-judgmental setting to express their feelings. As a counselor, you must try to be patient. No two people will react in the same way to a self-inflicted death. Remember, information you receive is secondhand. The big question will be, "Why?" Less than one-third of people committing suicide leave a note or give a reason for their action. Each question raised, when answered, will generate another question. Understanding of what has happened will come quicker than the answer to "Why?" Help those affected to sort out and understand the facts.

Solid advice and counsel to family, friends, or others affected by a person's suicide include: "This too will pass. The time will come to stop asking why. You will experience 'low' and 'high' days, but they will even out." Help such people understand what God's answer to suicide is. Neither you nor they can be certain of where a victim will spend eternity. A person could have called on Jesus in life's final moments. Pray with the one affected by someone's suicide, asking God for peace, rather than relying on someone's opinion. God is just and good, and we can trust him. "Will not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Gen 18:25). Yes, he will!"

This lesson is **important** because it explains some of the reasons people consider ending their own lives. It helps you understand how to counsel a person in despair and those who grieve after the loss of someone who has taken their life.

The **main truth** of this lesson is that suicide is an emotional decision. It is made because of intense pain, which a person believes can be resolved in no other way. The lesson teaches that suicide is never a person's first choice to relieve their situation.

Answer these questions for **review**:

1. What is the most common reason a person may take their life? [Pause]
A. If you said the most common reason for taking one's life is to end the pain they are suffering, you are correct.
2. What kind of decision is the one to take your life? [Pause]
A. If you answered, "Ending one's life is an emotional decision, not a rational one," you answered correctly.
3. Why should we try to understand why someone may take their life? [Pause]
A. If you said, "We should try to understand so we can see the signs and offer counsel before they make a desperate emotional decision," you are right.

Your **assignment** for this lesson is to listen to it several times to learn the story of Absalom and Ahithophel. Tell it to some fellow believers in your own words. Discuss with them the reasons a person in your culture might choose suicide. Ask them to share any such deaths they have known about. How was the leader able to help those who were grieving?