

Myths about Suicide

Adapted from: Joiner, T. (2010). *Myths about suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Myth: Suicide's an easy escape, one that cowards use

Reality: It's not so easy; most attempts at suicide fail. The self-preservation instinct is very strong. The body can resist many forms of self-injury. Some murderers have reported a desire to kill self, but killed others as an easier alternative.

Myth: Suicide is an act of aggression, anger, or revenge

Reality: Can be true, but isn't always—or even often. Rage and desire for revenge can be a risk factor. Majority of angry people don't suicide, and...majority of suicides are not angry.

Myth: Suicide is selfish, a way to show excess self-love

Reality: Suicidal thinking is often based on the belief that one's social connections are ruptured. Those who suicide often feel that the act is an expression of selflessness. What the suicidal person is thinking at the time is actually quite different from selfishness. Their idea is along the lines of, "my death will be worth more than my life to others." That idea is mistaken, but the tragedy is that the suicidal person doesn't know it's mistaken. They think the idea is true, and it spurs their fatal behavior.

Myth: Suicide is a form of self-mastery

Reality: Idea stems from the phenomenon of suicidal people wanting to retain the means as a "last resort." But a "last resort" implies the anti-suicidal retention of other, non-suicidal options.

Myth: People who die by suicide don't make future plans

Reality: When the irrevocable act leading to suicide is taken, nearly all survivors report immediate regret. For many, the suicide is part of future plans for those whom the person imagines he or she burdens. Evidence suggests that desire to live and desire to die is present in those who die by suicide.

Myth: People often die by suicide on a whim

Reality: Common in literature; almost never in real life. Secretive planning and preparation can make a suicide seem impulsive when in fact it is not. Most survivors of suicide attempts report thoughts of suicide long prior to the attempt.

Myth: You can tell who will die by suicide by their appearance

Reality: Warning signs do exist, but generally involves a dramatic change in appearance, hygiene, etc. Paradoxically, some take better care of their appearance after the decision to suicide is made. Some lifestyle choices that may lead to suicide may also lead to an unkempt appearance.

Myth: You'd have to be out of your mind to die by suicide

Reality: The translation is "Suicide is foreign to my thinking." But it may not be foreign to others' thinking. Attempting suicide is not itself indicative of psychosis, dementia, or mental illness. But certainly can be an indicator of disturbance.