

insights into suicide

- Sophia Ppali

Dear reader, it is a pleasure to meet you.
My hope is that this text might be,
a wake up call, a nudge, a reminder,
that the first step to prevention is communication.¹

¹ Based on the opening lines from Sabrina Benaim, *Depression & Other Magic Tricks* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2017), p. 9.

insights into suicide

Critical & Historical Studies

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to my sister Elena, who saved this dissertation
to Raphaël, who always challenges me to think outside of the box

This is not a suicide note ².

² Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015), p.11.

It is not a love letter to suicide nor a hidden cry for help.

It is not a “DO NOT ATTEMPT SUICIDE” motivational speech.

With this piece, I am not trying to convince you, my dear reader, that suicide is wrong.

Neither do I attempt to glorify it.

I will, though, use the word suicide so frequently in this document, that I will probably make you feel uncomfortable. But I guess that is the goal...

What I am aiming to achieve is to encourage you to reflect, reconsider a topic that you may or may not have given much thought about before.

Perhaps, you have heard about it in the news, in your history or literature books, in television.

Perhaps, you have had personal experiences,

battling with suicidal thoughts before,

losing a loved one because of it.

Perhaps, it is all of the above.

The big scary S word that is suicide, although common, still remains an immense taboo in today’s society. This very fact may be one of the reasons³ driving people to go through with it.

Drawing from primary and secondary research, and inspired by conversations, fictional books, experiences, as well as my own battles with depression, I will look into the subject of suicide from different perspectives, within history, religion, media and our daily lives.

³ Jeffrey Borenstein, *The importance of speaking out about suicide*, 2017
<<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/brain-and-behavior/201702/the-importance-speaking-out-about-suicide-0>> [Accessed 12 June 2018]

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part 1

before

*When she was seventeen, trying to survive her senior year in high school,
she was hit by a motorcycle while crossing the road.*

*The accident was quite serious,
the physical pain caused by the impact was intense.*

*A few weeks later her body started getting better,
the pain started fading away,
the wounds to heal,
giving their place to scars.*

BUT...

A new kind of suffering surfaced.

A kind of suffering that she was not familiar with.

A suffering that she couldn't really explain;

not to her parents,

nor her doctors,

not even herself.

Suddenly...

*She went from an A student, to being unable to write a single sentence
because her mind just would not SHUT UP.*

She was panicking over insignificant things.

She started doubting herself.

She just was NOT good enough,

NOT pretty enough,

NOT smart enough.

She could not look herself in the mirror

without thinking as many as six negative things before breakfast.

*In her classmates' eyes she was a hero,
the girl who survived the crash,
the girl who broke her face but not her spirit,
the girl who showed up in class although she had every reason not to,
the girl who never lost her smile...*

How could they have guessed that inside she was dying?

*She was becoming a prisoner in her own mind,
trapped in a vicious cycle of negative thoughts,
unable to escape.*

*Getting out of bed became hard,
falling asleep was even harder.
Working became hard,
not working was even harder.*

Smiling was becoming exhausting, soooooo exhausting...

*As the weeks, then the months were passing, life was moving on,
she wasn't.*

*She was falling deeper
and deeper
and deeper
and deeper
down the black hole, that was her own jail.*

*She went from being on top of the world, to hitting rock bottom.
She went from living in a world*

*filled with dreams, rainbows, love, adventures,
to living in a world that is dull, drained of colour or hope.*

She was supposed to be having the time of her life⁴, but she wasn't.

The worst part is she honestly had no idea what was going on.

She really didn't.

There were moments where she was getting better,

she could see a light at the end of the tunnel.

There were days she could get out of bed, enjoy the sun.

There were days, she was pressing snooze only once⁵.

But there were bad days, black days...

Day she felt everything and nothing, all at once...

“Why can't it all go away, I am tired,

I am tired of being nice,

I am tired of smiling,

I am tired of being,

I am just tired”

Out of the blue, suicidal thoughts came knocking

on the door of her mind.

⁴ Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, (US: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006), p. 16.

⁵ Sabrina Benaim, *Depression & Other Magic Tricks: Poems* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry, 2017), p.15.

why suicide

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), every year, around the world, 800.000 people⁶ die from suicide.

Time to do some math.

That is about 3.000 people per day.

It accounts roughly to one person every 40 seconds⁷.

By the time you finish reading these lines at least one person would have died from suicide.

This text is about 10.000 words, which should take an average person about 77 minutes⁸ to read.

77 minutes is 4.620 seconds.

By the time you finish reading this piece of writing about 116 people will die from suicide.

For each one of these individuals that takes his or her own life, at least 20 more will attempt to do so.

I find this quite shocking? Don't you?

⁶ WHO, Fact Sheets: Suicide <<http://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>> [accessed 20 April 2018]

⁷ Inspired by Patrick Roche, Every 40 Seconds, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXyDtwNS7s>> [Accessed 1st July 2018].

⁸ WHO, Preventing Suicide, a global perspective, [World Health Organisation, 2014] p. 3

I used to believe that suicide is wrong, that despite whatever is happening in someone's life, it should never be an option. Life is wonderful and we should aim to live as much as we can. I was terrified of death. I also had the impression that anyone posting about suicide on social media was just seeking for attention. They would never really go through with it. Young me was so naive.

It was not until I went through a rough patch myself, a few years back, and later, worked on a documentary about the real story of a girl who had attempted suicide multiple times⁹, that I started to understand how suicidal thoughts can develop. Working on that project also made me realise how passionate I was about the field of mental health. Thus, for the past year most of my design work focused on that, even though, deep inside I still considered suicide to be wrong.

Back in November, I attended a talk on suicide by psychiatrist Dr. Hakan Yonel, which was eye opening. The doctor talked about common misconceptions, such as suicide posts on social media not always being a cry for attention, but might actually be for help. After the talk, a fascinating conversation began between the audience and himself, which made me reevaluate every previous view I had on the subject. He brought up an example of man in his 70s. His wife had passed away along with all of his friends. He was physically ill and tired. He had no children to look after him. The man had lived a fulfilling life and he came to the conclusion that it was time to end it. In all accounts, his decision seemed to be rational. He had planned everything up to the last detail. Where he

⁹ Dan Worth, 'Students Work with BBC to Produce Animation for Mental Health Awareness Week', *The University of Kent*, 2017 <<https://www.kent.ac.uk/news/kentlife/13496/students-work-with-bbc-to-produce-animation-for-mental-health-awareness-week>> [accessed 25 March 2018].

would die, how to inform the police, what would happen to his body, so he would cause no extra trouble to anyone involved.

Let's suppose he told this to the psychiatrist. What was the psychiatrist supposed to do? The man was not depressed and didn't show any previous signs of a mental illness, hence the psychiatrist could not prescribe any sort of medication, or admit his patient to a mental health facility. The only thing he could attempt would be to try and change the patient's mind, but what if that did not work?

What would you do in that case, my dear reader? Would you try to stop him by force if nothing changed his mind? Would you call the police to arrest him? Would you badly judge this man if he did go through with it? Would you believe that what he done was a crime against his life? Isn't it his life, his choice? If it became unbearable, why prolong it anyway?

We are scared of suicide, we think it is a sin, but maybe it is not. It should not be seen as good or bad without considering all the reasons that led an individual to that decision. Can we consider that the people who jumped from the windows of the World Trade Center during the attacks of 9/11 made a bad decision? Didn't they take their own lives intentionally¹⁰ jumping to their own deaths, on that very moment, when the building was on fire? Or can we really blame the prisoners in death row for wanting to decide of their own fate by ending their life at a time they chose?

Dear reader, what people like me and you should understand is that suicide can be a rational decision, and that doesn't necessarily make it a bad one more than it makes it a good one.

¹⁰ Definition of suicide as given my *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, Fourth edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.717.

Most people who die by suicide suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder¹¹. Suicidal behaviour in those cases is really just a symptom that can most likely be prevented if addressed on time and correctly. What happens if this does not happen, if the person is scared to talk about their thoughts, if they give into them? Is it really their fault then? What would you do if your mind kept telling you, you are worthless and it just wouldn't stop? Dying from a physical illness is natural, so why is dying from a mental one so often seen as a horrible wrongdoing? Most importantly how do we encourage that person not to be scared in the first place and ask for help before their suffering becomes unbearable?

That one lecture sparked something in me, it raised queries I never thought I had. It made me curious to delve deeper into the topic of suicide. How was suicide perceived through the ages? What shapes our perceptions of it? What makes it such a common phenomenon but simultaneously such a taboo nowadays? Is there anything we can do to better prevent it as a society?

These are some of the questions I hope to answer by researching and writing this text.

Will you join me on this journey?

¹¹ 'Suicide Facts and Figures', *American Foundation for Suicide Prevention*, 2015 <<https://www.theovernight.org/?fuseaction=cms.page&id=1034>> [accessed 20 May 2018].

the past

¹²**suicide** /'s(j)u:ɪsɪd

NOUN

1. The action of killing oneself intentionally.
'he committed suicide at the age of forty'
2. A running drill consisting of a sprint to a set point (especially a line on a basketball court) and back to the start, immediately followed by additional sprints of lengthening distances.
'we shot free throws and if we missed we ran suicides'

VERB

1. Intentionally kill oneself.
'she suicided in a very ugly manner'

ORIGIN

Mid 17th century: from modern Latin *suicidium* 'act of suicide', *suicida* 'person who commits suicide', from Latin *sui* 'of oneself' + *caedere* 'kill'.

¹² 'Definition of Suicide in English by Oxford Dictionaries', *Oxford Dictionaries* | *English* <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/suicide>> [accessed 24 May 2018].

Suicide, the action of killing oneself intentionally, has been recorded since antiquity¹³. Although traditionally associated with psychology and psychiatry, it is also the focus of other disciplines such as philosophy, literature, law, anthropology or sociology.

myths

In the ancient Greek and Roman vocabulary, there was no a specific term to describe suicide. It was frequently explained with phrases such as “self-murder” or “voluntary self-killing”¹⁴. However, the act itself had a strong presence within mythology, which back then was the dominant force driving people’s motives and beliefs. Therefore, myths can be a mean of gaining a better understanding of how suicide was perceived during the classical ages in Europe.

The stories of Aigeos and Arachne are a couple of examples of the occurrence of suicide within greek mythology. Aigeas, the king of Athens killed himself by jumping in the sea after he thought his son Theseus to be dead, killed by the Minotaur. Arachne, was a young seamstress who, according to the myth, enraged Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, after claiming she can weave better than her. In one version of her myth, Arachne, scared that Athena would kill her, took matters into her own hands and hanged herself. Athena, after seeing her dead, regretted her outrage and turned Arachne into a spider, so she could keep on weaving forever¹⁵.

¹³ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

¹⁴ A. J. van Hooff, ‘Icons of Ancient Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Art’, *Crisis*, 15.4 (1994),

¹⁵ Piero Cattaneo, Antonio Lupatelli, and Sergio, *Theoi kai heroes: mythologiko lexiko*. (Athēna: Ekdoseis Stratiki, 1992) p.12, 25.

Overall, throughout greek mythology, women and men died by suicide in quite different manners which reflect the ancient culture. Women mostly committed suicide due to grief, loss or love, which can be associated with the fact that they were solely in charge of raising children and maintaining a home. As a consequence, losing a husband or a child was too much to handle and could lead to feelings of despair that ended in suicide. On the other hand, the main reasons for men taking their own lives were more about pride, self-sacrifice or shame¹⁶.

Another interesting theme that surfaced within myths is heroic suicide. In the study “The act of suicide in Greek mythology”, Sikoutres, a Greek philologist, discussed the fact that when it comes to a hero’s death, it is always voluntary as he or she made the intentional choice to follow the path that would ultimately lead to their death. In this context, suicide becomes an ultimate act self sacrifice for a higher idea. It is not referred to as suicide anymore but as a heroic death¹⁷.

Even to this day, heroic suicides are often celebrated in a number of countries and cultures as I recently discovered while I was in China as part of my course. During my time there, I came across an example of the celebrated heroic suicide surfacing from a myth. The Dragon Boat Festival or Duanwu Festival, which this year was held on the 18th of June, is a big celebration that takes place all over China. The story mostly associated with the festival, is that of the death of the famous poet and minister Qu Yuan (c343-278 BC) who, in despair, drowned himself in a river after his

¹⁶ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

¹⁷ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

home state was captured by the Qin dynasty. The legend says, locals raced in their boats to save him or retrieve his body¹⁸. Thus, to this day, huge numbers of people gather near rivers and race dragon boats.

greek philosophers

Within ancient Greek philosophy, there were different approaches towards suicide. For some of them, such as Pythagoras, it was considered a mortal sin. For others, this form of death was accepted under specific circumstances. For instance, Aristotle viewed it as a sin that impacted not only the individual, but the society he was a part of as well¹⁹. However, this was in cases where self-killing occurred voluntarily. In cases such as an order from a court, it was allowable²⁰. Plato²¹, one of the most famous philosophers, considered self-killing to be a dishonour. Nevertheless, he stated that in rare situations such as a terminal illness²², exceptions could be made where suicide would be justifiable and not seen as disgrace. His own teacher, Socrates, was ordered by a court to die by drinking a cup of poison. Although he was given the option to leave Athens and escape, this was a fate he considered to be worse than death and took the poison²³.

¹⁸ 'Dragon Boat Festival', *ChinaHighlights* <<https://www.chinahighlights.com/festivals/dragon-boat-festival.htm>> [accessed 10 July 2018].

¹⁹John D Papadimitriou and others, 'Euthanasia and Suicide in Antiquity: Viewpoint of the Dramatists and Philosophers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 100.1 (2007), 25-28.

²⁰ Michael Cholbi, 'Suicide', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2017 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017). <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/suicide/>> [accessed 10 June 2018].

²¹ Arezina Asomatou and others, 'The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology', *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

²²John D Papadimitriou and others, 'Euthanasia and Suicide in Antiquity: Viewpoint of the Dramatists and Philosophers', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 100.1 (2007), 25-28.

²³ L. Lykouras and others, 'Suicidal Behaviour in the Ancient Greek and Roman World', *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 6.6 (2013), 548-51

This begs the question, should Socrates death be considered a suicide as it was self-inflicted and he chose to drink the hemlock willingly²⁴? Was it not as it was brought upon him by the court?

Later on, Cynicism (5th century BC) and Stoicism (3rd century BC), accepted that a person has the right to end their life if it became insufferable²⁵. Seneca, a stoic philosopher, declared that a wise man “lives as long as he ought, not as long as he can”²⁶. Antisthenes, considered to be the founder of Cynicism, introduced the term “justifiable extraction” which is one of the first specific terms to describe suicide²⁷.

religion

The belief that suicide is a sin, is a general theme within many religions but the main reason as to why it is still considered as such today can be found and explained by the Christian roots of our occidental society. According to Simon Critchley “The legal and moral framework that still shapes our thinking and judgement about suicide is hostage to a Christian metaphysics that declares that life is a gift of god”. Ending life means rejecting this ultimate gift, consequently, preventing entry to heaven. Orthodox Christianity is the main religion in Cyprus where I come from. There, religious studies are a part of the public school curriculum from

²⁴ R. G. Frey, ‘Did Socrates Commit Suicide?’, *Philosophy*, 53.203 (1978), 106-8.

²⁵ L. Lykouras and others, ‘Suicidal Behaviour in the Ancient Greek and Roman World’, *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 6.6 (2013), 548-51

²⁶ Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015).

²⁷ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

early on²⁸. Recently, I came across a notebook I had for that subject in high school. Curious, I opened it, only to stumble upon notes for a class we had on the topic of death. One line specifically caught my eye. It described suicide as *a violation and disrespect of human life*. This was unconsciously infused in my mindset for most of my life. It is an example of how some cultural beliefs are a result of religion.

In the spring of 2014, a distant relative fell out of a window to his death. It was officially an “accident”. The man had a funeral service in a church, which was followed by his burial in a cemetery. What most of those people or the church did not know, was that his death was a suicide. His family of course knew, but they did not report it. If they did, they would not be able to have a funeral service for him or even bury him in a cemetery. He would have to be buried outside of the cemetery, with just a plaque, no cross and his family would not be able to have a memorial²⁹. Killing oneself is a crime according to the religion that drives our culture. This can contribute to superstitions, making people with suicidal thoughts afraid to speak up, as well as affecting the family of the person, making them feel ashamed. Similarly in the Catholic church, the priest has the right to refuse to perform a funeral. It is recognised, however, that suicide can be an act of an ill mind, hence a burial service can take place as “only god can read the depths of our souls”³⁰.

²⁸ ‘A Guide to Education in Cyprus’ (Ministry of Education Cyprus) <<http://www.moec.gov.cy/odigos-ekpaidefsis/documents/english.pdf>> [accessed 1 July 2018] 37, 49, 54, 72.

²⁹ This is what happens in Cyprus, I cannot speak of how orthodox christianity is at other regions.

³⁰ Fr. William Saunders, ‘The Sin of Suicide’, Catholic Education Resource Center, 2003 <<https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/the-sin-of-suicide.html>> [accessed 20 May 2018].

Other religious movements such as Hinduism or Buddhism, offer the possibility of reincarnation. Death does not mean the end of life³¹. Could it be that for the adepts of these religions, dying by suicide is seen as a shortcut to the next life, a way to skip the current one to a better one? Hinduism does not approve of suicide. The soul of a those who killed themselves, would be send back a few lives, hence fall behind in the path of liberation. It will also leave them unprotected to agonising distress. However, specific spiritual situations are allowed, during which the individual's body was perceived to be the last remnant that averts the soul from reaching liberation. In these cases, the acceptable methods of self-killing are self-starvation and self-suffocation³². Buddhism views death as an awakening for the soul rather than a continuation. The previous life affects the future life, thus dying by suicide is viewed as a negative act that does not make sense. The person's spirit will awaken carrying bad karma to the next life, as well as the suffering that was ended suddenly³³.

Lastly, as far as religion goes, an interesting case is that of Islam which views suicide strictly as a wrongdoing that will negatively impact a person's spiritual journey³⁴. Despite this fact, we frequently hear in the news about suicide bombings carried in the name of Islam. This raises the

³¹ Anna Orońska, 'The Dignity of a Dying Human in Different Religions of the World' (Palliative Care Center, 2009) <<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.842.2868>> [accessed 17 June 2018].

³² Hinduwebsite, 'About Suicides in Hinduism', *Hinduwebsite* <https://www.hinduwebsite.com/hinduism/h_suicide.asp> [accessed 10 July 2018].

³³ Anna Orońska, 'The Dignity of a Dying Human in Different Religions of the World' (Palliative Care Center, 2009) <<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.842.2868>> [accessed 17 June 2018].

³⁴ Muslim Public Affairs Council, 'Religious Views on Suicide', *Muslim Public Affairs Council* <<https://www.mpac.org/programs/anti-terrorism-campaign/islamic-views-regarding-terrorism-and-suicidem/religious-views-on-suicide.php>> [accessed 10 June 2018].

query, as to what is the role of religion in this phenomenon. Some of the groups that execute these acts believe that their actions fulfil the duties of jihad, and they see themselves as “martyrs³⁵”. Militant groups such as Al-Qaeda, and ISIS claim that istishhad (death of a martyr) is justified under the laws of Islam.

renaissance and the age of discovery

In the course of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance eras, dying by suicide was considered one of the ultimate crimes committed by a person³⁶. Those who attempted to end their lives were excluded from the community. In 1670, an order by the Monarch of France, Louis XIV, attempted to punish the already dead. He commanded that the individual’s body would be carried throughout the streets and all his belongings would be confiscated. He assumed that it would teach a lesson to all those who contemplate the act. This contributed greatly to the social stigma against anyone who attempted or died from suicide. However, Renaissance also saw the acknowledgement of the the virtuousness of the act of suicide³⁷. William Shakespeare, the English poet whose work is relevant up to this day, used suicide as a dramatic plot point in quite a few of his works. Probably the most notable one, *Romeo and Juliet*, saw both of its main characters killing themselves. Other works of his that include characters killing themselves are *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Hamlet*.

³⁵ A.J. Caschetta, ‘Does Islam Have a Role in Suicide Bombings?’, *Middle East Forum*, 2015 <<https://www.meforum.org/articles/2015/does-islam-have-a-role-in-suicide-bombings>> [accessed 10 July 2018].

³⁶ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

³⁷ Arezina Asomatou and others, ‘The Act of Suicide in Greek Mythology’, *Encephalos*, 53.4 (2016), 65-75

modern and contemporary times

During the seventeenth century, there was a shift from suicide being an ethical issue to it becoming a medical issue³⁸. By the end of the century, the act stopped being referred to as self-murder and the term suicide was introduced.

The Scottish philosopher David Hume, in his essay “On suicide” sees suicide as a morally permissible act. He believed that “no man ever threw away life, while it was worth living”³⁹. He challenged the christian values and argued that dying by suicide does no harm to the society, it just means seizing doing good. Dear reader, let’s stop for a moment and try and think outside the box. Let’s imagine we are not humans and try to forget all the things we have learned about humans. Let’s try to attempt and see life from the point of view of a superior being, a being that oversees everything. Now try to analyse the behaviour of this individual that just ended his life before your eyes. Does it hurt you? Does it make you feel bad? It doesn’t, it’s just one less inferior being among more than seven billion. As Hume puts it, “The life of man is of no greater importance to the universe than that of an oyster”⁴⁰.

Another important piece of writing from that era is “The Sorrows of Young Werther” by Goethe. It sparked the occurrence we, nowadays, refer to as “Copycat suicides”. His novel tells the story of passionate young man who is madly in love with a woman. His unrequited love ultimately leads him

³⁸Siri Hustvedt, ‘Suicide and the Drama of Self-Consciousness’, *Suicidology Online*, 4 (2013), 105-13

³⁹ David Hume, *On Suicide*, Penguin Books: Great Ideas (London: Penguin, 2005). p.10.

⁴⁰ David Hume, *On Suicide*, Penguin Books: Great Ideas (London: Penguin, 2005). p.4.

toward ending his own life. The book turned Goethe into a literary sensation overnight. At the same time, it showcased that the immense melancholy caused by unfulfilled love can end with killing one's self. This inspired a number of suicides where the men imitated Werther's death from the book⁴¹. The "Werther effect", is in the spotlight, even today, after Netflix's TV series 13 Reasons Why.

In 1897, Emile Durkheim's book "Suicide" was published, in which he described suicide - a theme that was previously considered exclusively as a part of psychology or individualism - within the context of society. According to him, suicide is "all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce the result"⁴². With his work he created the basis of sociology and suicidology⁴³. He opened the door to changing the way society perceives suicidal behaviours as he showcased how outside factors can influence them.

Since the nineteenth century, suicide started being studied within medicine as well⁴⁴. Suicide victims were found to have reduced levels of a chemical substance called serotonin, which is one of the chemical neurotransmitters found to be reduced in patients suffering from depression. Up to this day though, scientists do not have a clear idea on how dysfunction of the serotonergic system is related to depression. Furthermore, not everyone with suicidal thoughts is depressed.

⁴¹ Patrick Devitt and Patrick Devitt, '13 Reasons Why and Suicide Contagion', *Scientific American*, 2017 <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/13-reasons-why-and-suicide-contagion1/>> [accessed 10 July 2018].

⁴² Emile Durkheim, *Suicide, a Study in Sociology* (New York: Free Press, 1996), p.44.

⁴³ The scientific study of suicidal behaviour

⁴⁴ Siri Hustvedt, 'Suicide and the Drama of Self-Consciousness', *Suicidology Online*, 4 (2013), 105-13

part 2

meanwhile

*She is sitting in her room again,
Crying, crying, crying.
Wondering what is wrong,
Wondering why she doesn't fit in.*

*She is a girl,
almost a woman,
Why is she crying?
She is supposed to be strong,
powerful like all of her favourite superheroes.*

*She is not weak,
She is not weak,
She feels so weak.*

*She is fighting a war inside her own head.
A war no one can see.*

*She is in the middle of it.
She is the key to ending it.
She is the key to declaring truce without any bloodshed.
She is the only one who can stop all the voices, all the doubt.*

*All she needs to do is to stand in the middle of the battlefield
and scream "STOP" at the top of her lungs.*

*Scream with all her soul, with all her being
and mean it, truly mean it.
It seems so simple but she just can't do it.*

Every time she tries all that comes out of her mouth is a whisper,

a whisper saying "Please just leave me alone"

*Some mornings, the ones where she could get out of bed,
the whisper becomes a bit louder, almost a proper voice.
By the end of the day though, she is silent again, unable to make a
sound.*

*She is fighting and fighting and fighting
And it's getting harder and
harder and
harder*

*How can she win when every bit of her body is telling her to give up.
How can she?*

*She turns to her books, her movies, her games.
her escape paths,
her safety nets,
her comfort zone.*

*They took her far, far away from reality.
They took her to new lands
lands filled with magic,
lands filled with wonder.
The characters became her companions, her best friends,
the people she can look up to.*

She longed for those happy endings, for those happily ever afters.

the present

Fast forward, dear reader, let's look into some instances of how suicide is dealt with, in today's world. A world that is constantly moving, constantly changing, constantly evolving. A world that is heavily influenced and shaped, not only based on its past, but also by the media and the huge amounts of easily accessible information, which can bring us in touch, at any moment, with every other part of it.

overload

On a day to day basis, there is an information overload from everywhere; from the media, from our workspace, from our education environment, from our everyday interactions. At any given moment, our brain is fed with sounds and images, facts and figures.

Edwin S. Shneidman, the father of suicidology, suggests that, mental distress is considered to be the main factor associated with suicidal behaviours, as well as a necessary condition that contributes to the actual act⁴⁵. As WHO states⁴⁶ "1 in 4 people in the world will be affected by a

⁴⁵ Antoon A Leenaars, 'Edwin S. Shneidman on Suicide', *Suicidology Online*, 1 (2010), 5-18

⁴⁶ Mental Disorders Affect One in Four People', *World Health Organisation*, 2001 <http://www.who.int/whr/2001/media_centre/press_release/en/> [accessed 5 June 2018].

mental disorder at some point of their lives”. This makes me wonder how many of our mental health problems are hard-wired in our genes and how many are caused by a stressful lifestyle?

Everything that goes on around us; global warming, wars, Brexit, illnesses, economic crisis, can have a huge impact on our mental wellbeing. An immense amount of stress and uncertainty is caused, about what the future holds. We become more prone to disorders such as depression and anxiety⁴⁷. As a consequence, our personal relationships suffer. Although we are more connected than ever, we are lonelier than ever before⁴⁸, putting even more strain on our already deteriorating mental health. By putting our mental health on the back burner, we might feel powerless against the difficulties ahead. This feeling of hopelessness can become too much, to the point it becomes a good reason to develop suicidal thoughts.

celebrity suicides

On August 11 2014, the comedian Robin Williams, took his own life. Immediately, it became the main discussion topic of every article, every page, every social media post, everything. On that same day the number of calls to a suicide hotline in the US doubled⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ Louise Chunn, ‘How Anxiety Became a Modern Epidemic Greater than Depression’, *The Telegraph*, 1 June 2017 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/how-anxiety-became-a-modern-epidemic-greater-than-depression/>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

⁴⁸ Rebecca Harris, ‘Are We Lonelier than Ever?’, *The Independent*, 2015 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/features/the-loneliness-epidemic-more-connected-than-ever-but-feeling-more-alone-10143206.html>> [accessed 1 April 2018].

⁴⁹ Marisa Taylor, ‘Calls to Suicide Hotlines Spike after Robin Williams’ Death’, *Aljazeera America*, 2014 <<http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/8/16/suicide-hotlinesrobinwilliams.html>> [accessed 5 July 2018].

Prof. Ella Arensman, president of the International Association for Suicide Prevention, stated that after the news broke out, she received “five emails of people who had recovered from a suicide crisis, saying that they are thinking again about suicide”⁵⁰. Robin’s death was a shock. How could a man so happy, so successful decide that life is not worth living? We could not grasp that someone who we previously deemed so joyful, could be suffering from the same sorts of demons that we as “ordinary” humans sometimes do⁵¹. Some of us were even surprised about the fact that he hid it so well, that he wore his happy mask every day to entertain millions of people while behind it, was a man in pain, drowning in the depths of depression.

In the years that followed, more famous individuals ended their lives. In June of this year, fashion designer Kate Spade and American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain died by suicide within a three day span. Because the news of “celebrity suicides” travel with the speed of light almost, everyone around the globe reported properly they could lead to suicide contagion. This is a serious occurrence, where a suicide can inspire further suicidal behaviours⁵². Especially, if that suicide comes from someone influential, respected or seen as a role model, it can trigger some doubts about the meaning of life among his or her followers.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Fowler, ‘One Person Commits Suicide Every 40 Seconds: WHO’, *Medical Observer*, 2014 <<https://medicalobserverph.com/international-one-person-commits-suicide-every-40-seconds-who/>> [accessed 7 May 2018].

⁵¹ Lodro Rinzler, ‘Meditation Isn’t Enough: A Buddhist Perspective on Suicide’, *Huffington Post*, 2014 <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/lodro-rinzler/meditation-isnt-enough-a-_b_5672580.html> [accessed 11 March 2018].

⁵² ‘What Does “Suicide Contagion” Mean, and What Can Be Done to Prevent It?’, *HHS.Gov*, 2014 <<https://www.hhs.gov/answers/mental-health-and-substance-abuse/what-does-suicide-contagion-mean/index.html>> [accessed 11 March 2018].

Additionally, the media need to be quite careful when covering such events. Ohio University's suicide reporting guidelines state that "celebrity deaths by suicide have a strong potential to contribute to suicide contagion due to frequency and depth of reporting, as well as the likelihood that the public feels they can identify with such well-known individuals"⁵³. Although there are plenty of such guidelines out there⁵⁴ they are usually not taken seriously or are completely ignored.

young people and social media

Suicide, at the moment is the second leading cause of death among youngsters⁵⁵. They are amongst the most vulnerable groups to the pressures of society. They are the ones who still haven't figured out where they belong, the ones that are still shaping their personalities. They question everything and they are influenced by everything. Their need to fit in, to be perfect, makes them crave for acceptance. For them, the up-to-date race is even more important, even more challenging. We live in a society constantly changing. Ten years ago, things were very different, expectations were lower, life was simpler. Things that today are essential like social media, phones, internet did not have as much impact. New trends arise every single day causing a huge generation gap. Young people can feel isolated believing that the adults around them won't understand and it might even be true. Things that seem innocent and

⁵³ *Ohio Suicide Reporting Guidelines* (Ohio University) <<http://workforce.mha.ohio.gov/Portals/0/assets/Professionals/Ohio-Suicide-Reporting-Guidelines.pdf>>.

⁵⁴ 'Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide', *Reporting on Suicide* <<http://reportingonsuicide.org/>> [accessed 1 July 2018].

⁵⁵ American Psychiatric Foundation, 'Young People, Suicide and Popular Entertainment', *American Psychiatric Foundation*, 2017 <<https://www.psychiatry.org/news-room/apa-blogs/apa-blog/2017/09/young-people-suicide-and-popular-entertainment>> [accessed 11 July 2018].

trivial in the eyes of an adult might have a huge impact on a teenager, for instance a photo being shared over social media.

A phenomenon that has been noticed throughout social media recently is that of “Sadspiration”. Certain online communities, mostly consisting of young people, romanticise depression and depict a gentler, even beautiful, version of the disorder. “This distorted vision of depression makes a serious disease seem a sort of cool personality trait, and its sufferers as ethereal beauties – damaged but poetic and profound”⁵⁶. As suicidal thoughts are often related to depressive disorders, this can also contribute into romanticising suicide for all the wrong reasons. According to sociology, social and environmental factors can impact suicidal thoughts. Moreover, a relatively new occurrence, that of cyberbullying⁵⁷, can be a contributing factor to triggering suicidal feelings. After posting a comment, a picture online, a teenager can easily become the target of his peers to the point of feeling rejected, dishonoured or worse, constantly criticised and mocked. This phenomenon is particularly dangerous when the victims are very young teenagers who don’t have the mental tools and distance to protect themselves from cyberbullying.

a new “suicide trend”

Books, games and TV can become an escape for the youth, a temporary escape from all the responsibilities. Therefore, it is becoming increasingly

⁵⁶ Brown Elizabeth Nolan, ‘Sadspiration? Social Media Paints A Pretty, Skewed Image of Depression’, *Bustle*, 2013 <<https://www.bustle.com/articles/7736-sadspiration-social-media-paints-a-pretty-skewed-image-of-depression>> [accessed 7 May 2018].

⁵⁷ Marie Hartwell-Walker, ‘Cyberbullying and Teen Suicide’, *PsychCentral* <<https://psychcentral.com/lib/cyberbullying-and-teen-suicide/>> [accessed 11 July 2018].

important that the material that they are exposed to promotes positive messages and behaviours.

Until recently, there was a wave of young adult and teenage fiction (which in turn inspired TV, games and films) that had a dystopian theme, featuring lead characters overcoming obstacles in order to make their world better. Books and movies such as “Divergent” or “The hunger games” were loved by youngsters, and although they expressed the terror and uncertainty people felt about the future, they were usually optimistic by the end and ultimately cathartic.

Lately though, there has been a shift to works featuring mental health disorders and suicide⁵⁸. These types of stories might promote discussions about such sensitive topics that were previously big taboos but simultaneously, a number of these works “normalise” suicide, presenting it as a solution to what seem to be unsolvable problems. These characters that adolescents are “invited” to relate to, in some cases choose to escape their problems by ending their lives. So what does that teach young people who are struggling to find their place in the world we live in?

me before you and assisted suicide

A recent book, turned into movie called “Me before you” by the author Jojo James, dealt with the, not so widely mentioned, subject of assisted suicide, or physician assisted suicide, which is suicide completed with the help of another individual, often a physician or a nurse.

⁵⁸ Constance Grady, ‘The YA Dystopia Boom Is over. It’s Been Replaced by Stories of Teen Suicide.’, Vox, 2017 <<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/18/15881100/ya-dystopia-teen-suicide-13-reasons-why-hunger-games>> [accessed 17 December 2017].

After an accident, a man becomes paralysed from the chest down. In agonising pain, and knowing there is no hope for recovery, he decides to end his life. Even after falling in love with his caregiver, his mind remains unchanged. He ends his own life in an assisted suicide centre in Switzerland⁵⁹.

This raised a controversy within the community of people with disabilities, as it showcased a privileged man, who had all the support in the world, but still decided that living a life with a disability is a life not worth living⁶⁰. It was argued, that the book promoted the message that those with quadriplegia are a burden to their family, they are better off dead. Advocates against suicide also suggested that the book presented disability as a great tragedy, which puts an end to our worth as a human being, highlighting the importance of physical appearance in today's society and how this can stigmatised individuals with disabilities⁶¹.

On the other hand, the author has received a number of emails from people with disabilities thanking her for “reflecting their lives” and writing about an attractive man with quadriplegia, whose disability does not stand in the way of love⁶². Additionally, patients suffering from muscular dystrophy admit that losing physical abilities can completely destroy one's self esteem, as well as their will to live. Quadriplegics have

⁵⁹ Jojo Moyes, *Me Before You* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁶⁰ crippledscholar, ‘Media Roundup’, 2016 <<https://crippledscholar.com/tag/media-roundup/>> [accessed 23 April 2018].

⁶¹ Dominick Evans, ‘Hollywood Promotes the Idea It Is Better to Be Dead than Disabled’, 2016 <<https://www.dominickevans.com/2016/02/hollywood-promotes-the-idea-it-is-better-to-be-dead-than-disabled/>> [accessed 23 April 2018].

⁶² Stephanie Merry, ‘“Me Before You” Has a Disabled Main Character — but Activists Are Angry. Here's Why.’, *Washington Post*, 2016 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/06/03/me-before-you-has-a-disabled-main-character-but-activists-are-angry-heres-why/>> [accessed 23 April 2018].

to rely on other people to do everything for them, even simple actions like eating. Moreover, some are in excruciating nerve pain most of the time, for which they are unable to do anything about.

Shouldn't these people be able to decide if they live or die? Wanting to die might not even be about feeling like a burden to their family, or believing that their disabilities define them. It might be about wanting to put an end to their pain.

13 reasons why

In television and online shows, character representation is different than that of books or films. Because most of these programs are ongoing, viewers can keep watching for many hours. This makes identifying or sympathising with characters easier as they can become a part of the viewer's daily life as their repetitive appearance showcases that they have a past, a present, a future, just like us⁶³. According to Fiske in his book *Television culture*, who we identify with depends on our social and cultural background. Each one of us makes meaning of a character's life based on our personal experiences. We often empathise with characters that might be similar to us or someone we know, with characters that have traits we are familiar with. We also look up to characters who represent a version of a person we aspire to be.

The Netflix show *13 Reason Why*, is another one of the numerous examples of how the media portrays suicide and is an adaptation of a book with the same title⁶⁴. The show focuses on the weeks following the

⁶³ Fiske, John, *Television Culture* (London; New York: Methuen, 1987)

⁶⁴ Jay Asher, *Thirteen Reasons Why* (New York: Razorbill, 2007).

suicide of a high school student, Hannah Baker. Hannah leaves behind, thirteen tapes explaining naming the thirteen people and their actions, that led her to end her life⁶⁵. The show attempts to create an honest representation of the teenage experience during high school, which for some can be tough and stressful. According to its creators they aimed for the show to not be polite, to show the truth “as it is”. Due to the fact that as a society we tend to shy away from these hard topics, they wanted to address them directly and spark an honest conversation tackling topics such as suicide, rape and bullying.⁶⁶ Which, in some sense it did.

Dear reader, now imagine this.

A sixteen year old girl, gets bullied at school. This girl, returns everyday at home, feeling sad, feeling lonely. She turns on her laptop and gets lost in the world of series. What happens if the character she mostly identifies with is a young girl who resolved her bullying, her problems, by taking her own life? Even after her death, she kept having an effect on the people around her after, getting her justice, her revenge even. Not only that but the series, although targeted to people like our sixteen year old friend, showcases the exact way the suicide was carried. Although she might not have been suffering from any mental health problems, in her eyes she sees a solution to her bullying problem, and she also knows exactly how to do it. What happens then?

Despite its huge success, *13 Reasons Why*, has raised a lot of concern among mental health advocates about the potential implications this fictionalization of suicide might have, together with the possibility that it

⁶⁵ *13 Reasons Why* (Netflix, 2017).

⁶⁶ *13 Reasons Why | Beyond the Reasons* (Netflix) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ry-TOaM2Kfk>>.

might be causing increased numbers of suicide incidents among younger people. One study has demonstrated that since the show aired in 2017, there was a significant increase in the number of internet searches regarding suicide and “how to kill yourself”⁶⁷. The show also violates guidelines on how suicide should be portrayed in the media by; focusing on the social implications that lead Hannah’s suicide while completely undermining her mental health, making suicide seem like the only possible solution to the problem and using extremely graphic and detailed content for the actual act⁶⁸.

⁶⁷ John W. Ayers and others, ‘Internet Searches for Suicide Following the Release of 13 Reasons Why’, *JAMA Internal Medicine*, 177.10 (2017), 1527-29 <<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamainternmed.2017.3333>>.

⁶⁸ Korin Miller, “‘13 Reasons Why’ Is Not the Force for Mental Health Awareness You Think It Is’, *SELF* <<https://www.self.com/story/13-reasons-why-suicide-and-mental-health>> [accessed 12 May 2018].

out in the field

When I decided that this text would be around the theme of suicide, I wanted to personally carry out some field research on my own. Luckily enough, during the first couple of months of 2018, I had the privilege to be involved in a programme at Imperial College, called Open Minds. The aim of this project is to send students in secondary schools throughout the UK to provide mental health education.

After three months of training, including lectures from psychiatrists as well as school teachers⁶⁹, I had the opportunity to design and run six mental health workshops for about 80 kids aged 13 to 14.

The workshops focused on educating students about the topics of depression, anxiety, suicide. The goal was to teach them about the signs and symptoms for each of these topics, how to help a friend in need, a loved one or one's self when going through a rough time, while promoting the importance of openness. The ultimate end result, would be to spark a conversation between the students, to make them think about these topics that do not usually get addressed in the education system ⁷⁰.

⁶⁹ Six lectures: Substance Abuse by Dr Jeffrey Fehler, Eating Disorders by Dr. Nitisha Patel, Self-harm and Suicide by Dr. Hakan Yonel, Safeguarding session by Sinthu Subashkaran, Depression and Anxiety by Dr. Donna Arya and Teaching Skills by Hiri Acca

⁷⁰ Peter Tait, *Schools largely to blame for rising mental health issues*, 2015 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/12025711/Schools-largely-to-blame-for-rising-mental-health-issues.html>> [Accessed 10th February 2018]

Designing a class to teach teenagers about these “heavy” subjects seemed to be an exceptionally hard duty to accomplish. The challenge delivering vital information without promoting suicide or self harming in any way. I strived to design the classes to be “fun” by including a number of activities such as True - False, scenario cases, roleplaying and debating⁷¹. I wanted to endeavour, to keep a dialogue going, not only deliver raw information as that way I would probably lose the students’ attention. I approached the topics honestly, and directly asked the students specific questions. I let them do most of the talking, only guiding conversations. Using characters they knew for the scenario cases, such as Elsa from Frozen with symptoms of depression, made it more fun and relatable to them. What I was cautious to not do at any point was to mention any ways of attempting suicide, or self harm, to not give them any examples or ideas.

The workshops turned out to be successful in my opinion. In collaboration with the teachers, we encouraged the students to contribute in the discussion, and we tried to make them comfortable by creating a safe environment for them to speak their mind without being judged by the “class authority”. I observed that the students knew a lot about depression, anxiety, suicide and self-harm. They could give me specific details and definitions for each one. They also had quite a few misconceptions which in majority came from the media. For example, in one of the classes we had a discussion about antidepressants. A couple of students stated that they are useless, they make everything worse as individuals either get addicted to them or use them to overdose and take their own life. “That is what happens on TV”, they argued.

⁷¹ I later went on to turn these activities into a toolkit. <<https://project1324.com/projects/7hndb>>

When it came to discussing who the students would ask for help, quite a few students voiced that they would never talk to someone within the school environment, whether that is a teacher or a counsellor, as they do not trust them enough. Their arguments included: “*teachers talk to other teachers*”, “*they would call my parents*”, “*they would call CHILDLINE*”.

At the end of the classes, I got each student to fill out a short questionnaire⁷² which I used to evaluate how the following workshops could be improved. Some common themes occurred in the comment section of the feedback form. Almost one third of the kids indicated that they enjoyed being taught about mental health issues using character scenarios as it helped them understand the signs and symptoms better. The majority said that they enjoyed having the chance to give their opinion as well as having the time to explain or elaborate their points. Lastly, one of the questions I asked was: “What could be done to improve the sessions?”, three out of four of kids replied “*It would be good if those of us who suffer from these negative or suicidal thoughts could have the tutors that came in to provide personal help*”. This made me realise something I knew but did not really think about: even in those classes with all those happy, opinionated, loud teenagers, some of them were suffering in silence.

After delivering six workshops, I decided to delve deeper into the subject of mental health education from first hand. Therefore, it was time to carry out a research from the teachers’ point of view. I was interested to see what the teachers believed about the mental health education that is currently being provided, as well as their opinions about its importance. I

⁷² The answers for the questionnaire can be found here: <<https://tinyurl.com/y9j4dexo>>

sent out an opinion poll⁷³, which I promoted on social media and shared among people I knew. I got back 54 responses, from people who worked with kids all over the world.

The results were fascinating. A large amount of teachers pointed out that mental health education can equip the students with tools for personal and social involvement as well as enabling them to have a better learning journey. Consequently, it is essential⁷⁴ and should be compulsory⁷⁵ in schools. Nevertheless, only less than half of them stated that the structure they worked in provided some sort of mental health education to the students. Even in those cases it was very limited and only covered the bare minimum.

Mental health education should start as early in a child's school journey as possible⁷⁶ according to the educators, even as early as kindergarten. Furthermore, when it comes to students trusting their teachers with personal matters, according to the majority of responses, it really depends on the kid. Nevertheless, children are also more likely to open up when the teacher has one to one meetings with them, as it helps creating a stronger, more personal relationship that can assist in building trust.

⁷³ Questionnaire and answers can be found here: <<https://tinyurl.com/ycbfj3e9>>

⁷⁴ Mental health education was considered essential by 82.7% of those who completed the questionnaire.

⁷⁵ Mental health education should be compulsory in schools according to 80.4% of those who completed the questionnaire.

⁷⁶ Of those who filled the questionnaire 33.3% said mental health education should start from kindergarten, 19.6% said it should start from 6 to 9 years old.

part 3

later

“Hello.

Have a seat.

How are you?⁷⁷

How do you feel today?”

“I am doing okay”

“Are you sure you are doing okay?”

“Yes”

“If you were feeling okay you would not be here right now”

“Fine, I just want to die.”

“Why do you want to die?”

“I just want it to stop.”

“What is it that you want to stop?”

*“My brain, it is always overcrowded, it is always buzzing, always talking
All I want is a good night’s sleep after all those months of insomnia⁷⁸.*

I mean what is the point of life anyway?

I will never be able to read all the books I want,

I will never be able to be whoever I want to be and live the life I want.

I will never be able to become good at the things I want.

I am just so terribly limited⁷⁹.

So please tell me, doctor, what is the point?

I wake up every morning, get out of bed, get dressed.

I then wear my mask.

⁷⁷ Katrine Lynn Solvaag, *Broken People* (Burning Eye Books, 2018), p.10.

⁷⁸ Patrick Roche, *Every 40 Seconds*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jXyDtwNS7s>> [Accessed 1st July 2018].

⁷⁹ Sylvia Plath, *The unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath* (Anchor Books; Unabridged edition, 2000), p.43

A fake mask, a happy mask.

Then I go to school.

*I sit in a classroom surrounded by people,
some of them I call friends.*

Although I am in a room, full of people,

I feel lonely, so lonely. I feel so alone.

*And then the teacher starts to talk, talks about our futures
how we need to work hard to become who we want to be.*

And then I think about the future.

How do I imagine it? Who do I want to be?

And the answer is nothing.

I see nothing.

I imagine nothing.

I dream of nothing anymore.

I used to be a dreamer, I used to be a wisher. Now I am just a person.

Lately, It feels like someone held all my dreams,

all my hopes,

my future

in their palm and they just crushed them, broke them into little pieces.

I just stood there watching, powerless, unable to do stop it.

So tell me doctor, what is the point of life? ”

She stopped, looked at the doctor and let out a breath.

It felt like a weight was lifted from her chest.

*That day the words PTSD, and clinical depression, antidepressants
became part of her vocabulary.*

*“Talking about it and understanding it is the first step to recovery”
the psychologist said during her next visit.*

the past and the present combined with the future

It turns out suicide is everywhere. It is part of our past, our present, our future. It is a phenomenon that we need to accept and learn how to address within our daily lives. As Simon Critchley⁸⁰ says in his book “Notes on Suicide”, “ we are facing a massive social, physical and existential blockage”, due to the subject’s close proximity, its constant accessibility to each of us, which affects how we deal with it. We are frequently unable to think clearly on it. “We need to start talking about suicide and suicidal thoughts without being ashamed or prejudiced. We desperately need a more grown up forgiving and reflective discussion on the topic⁸¹”.

Through my research I realised that the fact that suicide is a taboo topic is one of the reasons that make it harder for people to express their suicidal thoughts, making them less likely to seek help. If we want to

⁸⁰Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015). p.15.

⁸¹Simon Critchley, *Notes on Suicide* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2015). p.13.

prevent it it is essential we start acknowledging it, that we are prepared for the cold, hard facts. The more open and honest we are about it, the more likely we would be able to assist someone that suffering from suicidal thoughts, or even ourselves, to not act on them. We also need to sometimes break down our superstitious barriers, and learn to accept it at occasions, or at least do not harshly judge those who attempt or go through with it. Throughout history, it was partially accepted and at points even deemed a honourable way to go so why can't we at least be a tiny more understanding towards it now? Suicide will never disappear forever as long as society keeps affecting us, there will be those between us, that will question their lives. Ultimately, if the decision is a rational one, if it is not due to a mental illness for example where we can provide help, if they are sure of it, if they won't change their mind then what else can we do? As a french colleague once told me, suicide could be considered, really, the only real choice we get to have in life; we do not choose to be born and exist, so shouldn't it be our choice to decide whether we live or die?

What we can do is educate people and ourselves how to recognise these negative feelings early on, how to express them, how to seek for help. We can show them that they have hundreds more reasons to live, and how they can take advantage of them.

Many programs are already in place to prevent suicide such as prevention hotlines throughout the world, often available 24-7 for people to call in at any point and talk with trained individuals. For people who are too anxious to talk on the phone, recently suicide prevention texting services appeared which can appeal mostly to the younger generation who are so

much more used to exchanging text messages via social media⁸². Charities and organisations like the Samaritans, Mind in UK or the Beijing Suicide Research and Prevention Centre, do their best to inform about mental health and suicide. They provide not only hotlines, but online information, workshops or media guidelines. Within education, schools now have counsellors that can talk with the children not only about school problems but also personal problems. More and more teachers and people in the workspace take classes in mental health aid training.

During the past months, whenever I googled suicide, the first results on my browser showed suicide hotlines. Searching the keyword suicide in Pinterest, gives me no results, just a page declaring that there were no Pins for my search as well as a line saying “If you’re in emotional distress or thinking about suicide, help is available.” Furthermore, Facebook, is using Artificial Intelligence to detect potential suicidal behaviours which caused the number of suicidal prevention content displayed to double⁸³.

Everything being done for suicide prevention is good, it can help, but I believe an emotional education that will provide us with a language that enables us to easily express emotions, teaching us that expressing those emotions is okay, is needed. We miss an education in which taking care of our minds is as important as taking care of our bodies. As the Greeks say “vous υγιής εν σώματι υγιεί”⁸⁴. We might get this education from different organisations, even within the media who are now featuring

⁸² ‘Crisis Text Line’, *Crisis Text Line* <<https://www.crisistextline.org/>> [accessed 2 July 2018].

⁸³ Translates to healthy mind, healthy body

⁸⁴ Constine Josh, ‘Facebook Rolls out AI to Detect Suicidal Posts before They’re Reported’, *TechCrunch*, 2017 <<http://social.techcrunch.com/2017/11/27/facebook-ai-suicide-prevention/>> [accessed 2 July 2018].

more and more mental health themes, however it is not instilled in our values, it is not a part of our growing up, our daily environments.

According to the teacher survey I completed, the majority of teachers said that a mental health education should start from kindergarten⁸⁵. But how can we teach three year old children about depression and anxiety? We don't, instead we explain basic moods they can identify, such as being sad or angry. We teach them from that very little age to recognise both positive and negative feelings and how to express them out loud. When describing our feelings with words, they immediately get a form, a description, which makes it easier to understand them. Learning to understand our emotions, and then expressing them can be the first step for learning to recognise suicidal thoughts, and seeking help on time.

I am neither a teacher, nor a psychologist so I do not know how this sort of education could be implemented, but I am looking into it and I will keep looking into it. However, by running my own suicide and depression workshops I know it can be done. Young people are open to it, they have opinions but they are also willing to create new ones or shape the ones they have. Organisations already run workshops within specific schools and companies, why can't that be something that is more standardised in the future? From a young age we do physical education at school, we could as well have emotional education. We can take sick days at work, why can't we take mental health days? When our arm breaks, we recognise the excruciating physical pain and we know by default that we need to go to a doctor. We should be able to recognise emotional pain and know when to go to our parents, our friends, the school counsellor, the psychologist, the psychiatrist. There are so many options.

⁸⁵ Questionnaire and answers can be found here: <<https://tinyurl.com/ycbfj3e9>>

Dear reader, suicide is everywhere. It is part of our past, our present and our future. We need to start talking about it without being ashamed or prejudiced. We need to acknowledge it.

part 4

after

She thought...

If a person like her,

*a person privileged enough to be in front of a screen now, writing,
reading,*

a person that has supportive parents,

a person who can afford to own a laptop, a mobile phone.

a person that had a chance to education, that has access to health care.

If a person like her, can come up with a hundred reasons to die,

surely she can also come with two hundred reasons to live.

*And if she couldn't then, those around her could remind her once a
while.*

She was not alone in this anyway.

She could now pick her suicidal thoughts out of the crowded rooms

in her head, and tell them to shut up, when they were being too loud.

Sometimes they would respond, sometimes though they would stay quiet.

Talking helped ,

talking to friends, to family, to her doctor.

Opening up helped,

talking about how she felt over and over and over and over again.

Writing helped.

Her diary became a safe space.

Her mind was no longer a party she did not want to be in⁸⁶.

She could understand it now, deal with it, live with it.

⁸⁶ Sabrina Benaim, *Depression & Other Magic Tricks: Poems*, 2017.

*She used to be always prepared for the worst case scenario, the best case one scared her. What if she got prepared for neither?
What if she let life take the wheel and she just enjoyed the ride?*

*She decided to give it another moment
another day,
another month,
another year.*

*Things can get better.
It was up to her.
It was up to her to be her own hero⁸⁷,
to decide that life is worth living.*

*If, at moments, she could not see that,
she was going to keep fighting,
stand in the middle of the war,
and try, just try
to give life another chance.*

⁸⁷ Be your own hero is my personal life moto for many years now. Last year I also got a tattoo of this quote.

aftermath

Writing this text was hard, for both obvious and not so obvious reasons. The topic of suicide is a tough one. Researching, although fascinating, was mentally draining and immensely challenging. Additionally, in numerous occasions I was viewed as an irrational person when I told others what I was writing about. The opinions of those around me, frequently made me ashamed of my work to the point where I did not want to share it. I reached a stage when, if asked what I was working on, I did not tell the truth. I was embarrassed. However, through this process I realised that my actions actually contributed to the problem. The whole point of writing about suicide is to start a conversation. I was doing exactly the opposite of what I was fighting for.

By the end, I became proud of my work, I talked about it. It made a lot of people feel uneasy, but it also had an unexpected effect. It gave them a free pass to speak about suicide, a topic they don't usually discuss. By saying that my work focuses on suicide and mental health, that invisible barrier sometimes disappeared. It encouraged individuals to open up, not necessarily on a personal level but by expressing their opinions. I think that when it comes to it even by helping one person, it can be deemed a job well done, because it is one person whose life has been improved even so slightly. So it makes me very happy that due to the fact that I

have been very open and honest about my work in my close environment, I have seen friends starting to open up, starting to become mindful about their feelings, about their mental health.

Furthermore, as a person who has been through the darkest parts of depression and came back, I can admit, I did contemplate suicide in my worse times, I did think it could be my way out. Although I am still fighting with depression and anxiety to this day, I have come a long way forward and I learned to cope with hopelessness and negative emotions. I learned to live with them, under the same roof that is my mind, I learned to embrace them.

I will not lie. I considered giving up quite often. But I did not. I kept going on. I kept writing. I kept making people uncomfortable. As time went by, I learnt a lot more about the topic of suicide that is on these pages, so at least, in my own mind it has now become a bit less of a taboo. I hope that is the case for you, my dear reader. After writing this piece I am no longer against suicide. I understand it better, and I can see why some people do resort to it or consider it as an option.

I came to realise that if we want to change our attitudes and improve prevention, it will be brought by people who are not afraid to say that they too, have struggled, who are brave enough to admit that their life is not as amazing as it seems from the outside, who are willing to be educated about mental illnesses, willing to talk about suicide, depression and anxiety. These are people that can have an actual impact, help fighting the stigma. They have been through hell and back, they understand it and they can help others understand it. These are the people that can encourage those around them to open up, to say “Hey, I am not feeling so well today, can we talk?.”

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