

Stop Calling People Who Die By Suicide Selfish

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The recent deaths of musicians Chester Bennington, Chris Cornell, and Butch Trucks are tragic as are all deaths resulting from suicide. If you are among those referring to them as “selfish”, I hope to shed some light on depression and suicide that might shift your mindset. Suicide is indeed incredibly difficult to understand.

There are many potential contributing factors to a person’s attempting suicide. Some individuals are in so much pain that they see suicide as the only way to make that pain go away. These individuals are often convinced that their loved ones would be better off if they were not around. Others feel so stuck in their life or with feelings of sadness and hopelessness, that they see suicide as the only way out. It is also not uncommon for an individual to be under the influence of a substance that reduces their inhibitions at the time they attempt suicide.

People who attempt suicide are not thinking clearly. It is not as if they sit down and make a pros and cons list. (If they did do that, in their dysfunctional thought process, it is likely the pros options would outweigh the cons.)

Suicide is often a decision made out of hopelessness and desperation, feelings usually fueled by depression. The word “depression” is a terribly misunderstood word and is often used as a synonym for sadness. Of course everyone will feel sad from time to time. Sadness is a common and healthy emotion. But true clinical depression is more extreme than just sadness. Clinical depression is one of the most common mental illnesses. It can last for weeks to even years, and is not something that you can just “snap out of”. Depression is most often caused by a combination of genetic, biological, environmental and psychological factors. Depression does not discriminate; it effects people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic statuses. Sometimes depression does not even include sadness but instead, anhedonia, which is the inability to experience pleasure, or a loss of interest in normal activities including previously enjoyed activities.

Symptoms of depression may include feelings of hopelessness, irritability, agitation or restlessness, lower sex drive, decreased concentration, decreased energy, insomnia or excessive sleeping, appetite and/or weight changes, and thoughts of death or suicide. People with depression do not all experience the same symptoms.

Please educate yourself about mental illness including depression, and about suicide prevention.

There are a few ways that you can help to prevent suicide! First, be aware of and recognize the warning signs. Warning signs include someone talking about suicide, social isolation, giving away prized possessions, changes in behavior or appearance, putting affairs in order, expressions of feelings of hopelessness, talk of being trapped, or statements like “it would be better if I wasn’t here”.

Next, identify risk factors (characteristics that may lead a person to engage in suicidal behaviors). Some known risk factors include past suicide attempts, family history of suicide, chronic illness, depression, prolonged stress, harassment or bullying, stressful life events, or access to lethal means.

Lastly, promote protective factors (characteristics that help people deal with stress and reduce their chances of engaging in suicidal behaviors), and know how to talk to people about seeking mental health services. Some protective factors include connecting to family or community, coping skills and problem-solving skills, a sense of purpose in life, relationships, self-esteem, and access to behavioral health care.

If you think someone you know might be suffering from depression, please contact a mental health professional in your area. Most importantly, never assume you know what is going on in a person’s head and life. Suicide is not a selfish act, but rather a desperate one fueled by pain and hopelessness!

If you or someone you know needs help, call 1-800-273-8255 for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. You can also text HELLO to 741-741 for free, 24-hour support from the Crisis Text Line. Outside of the U.S., please visit the International Association for Suicide Prevention for a database of resources.