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Suicide: From Sin to Sickness

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From Judas to Kurt Cobain, suicide has not been a stranger to both ancient and modern cultures. However, Western cultures have come to view suicide differently. Since Christianity became Western society's largest practiced religion, suicide has been considered to be a mortal sin. However, as more research has been done on mental illness, Westerners have begun to view suicide sympathetically as a sign of severe mental suffering.

From the very early days of Christianity, religious doctrines made it clear that suicide was against God's will and human morality. However, suicide was not officially labeled an unforgivable sin until St. Augustine determined that it violated the Fifth Commandment: God's command 'Thou shalt not kill,' is to be taken as forbidding self-destruction, especially as it does not add 'thy neighbor', as it does when it forbids false witness, 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.'¹

In addition to St. Augustine, theologian St. Thomas Aquinas also agreed with prohibiting suicide. Aquinas believed suicide dishonored the sacrifice of Jesus, harmed an individual's entire community, and dishonored God's gift of life. As a result of both theologians declaring suicide as sinful, it became Christian law that the body of a person who died by suicide was desecrated by the church and denied a proper Christian burial.²

Subsequently, in the Elizabethan era, Christian sanctions against suicide were particularly strict. If an individual attempted suicide, the individual was believed to have committed the deadliest sin and was thus convicted of a crime known as *felonia de seipso*, which translates to "a vile crime against oneself."³ Believing that victims were directly influenced by the devil, the Elizabethans inflicted harsh punishments upon them, dead or alive. Ironically, people who sur-

vived their suicide attempt were sentenced to death by hanging. If the person committed suicide, their naked body was carried by other Christians during the night to a randomly-located pit. Then, the body was thrown into the pit with a wooden stake hammered through it, pinning it to the ground. Finally, the pit was re-covered with dirt. During this ceremony, no minister was present and no prayers were said. Along with the body being disrespected, family members of the suicide victim also suffered. The court would take away all of the deceased's possessions and give them to the royal family. The only way to avoid such a punishment was if one was found to be insane; however, this event rarely occurred.⁴

For nearly 200 years after the Elizabethan era ended, Christianity remained a vital part of life in Western cultures. However, with an increased focus on the treatment of mental illness, people started to view suicide differently. This road to treating the mentally ill properly proved to be a long one. During the Medieval period, the mentally ill were viewed as less than human. It was widely believed that the mentally ill were either bewitched or possessed by the devil. Therefore, they were often subjected to exorcisms at the hands of Church officials. In some cases, a hole was drilled into the skulls of the afflicted in order to release the "evil spirit" from their bodies. Known as "trephining," the majority of people who underwent this procedure died. In addition to exorcisms and trephinations, the mentally ill were often imprisoned in inhumane conditions or publicly executed.⁵

During the eighteenth century, Westerners stopped executing the mentally ill but continued to lock them in asylums, separating them from "proper" society. Asylums were known to be horrific and disgusting places. There is evidence that patients were often chained to their beds, beaten on a daily basis,

1 St. Augustine, In M. Dods. *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120101.htm>

2 Michael Cholbi. "Suicide," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017. Section 2.2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/suicide/>

3 Elsinore UCSC. "Ophelia's Burial." University of California, Santa Cruz, elsinore.ucsc.edu/burial/burialSuicide.html.

4 Ibid

5 Psychology OpenStax College, "Mental Health Treatment: Past and Present," *Lumen*, SUNY Textbooks, courses.lumenlearning.com/wsusandbox/chapter/mental-health-treatment-past-and-present/.

and left to care for their own basic needs.⁶ Although most people viewed this treatment of the mentally ill as acceptable, Phillipe Pinel of France did not. Pinel observed the conditions of French asylums and found them appalling. Thus, he began advocating for better treatment, including measures such as unchaining patients from their beds and talking to them. Furthermore, when Pinel finally instituted his reforms, he found that these simple measures greatly improved the patients' sanity and morale.⁷ Following in Philippe Pinel's footsteps, American Dorothea Dix spent the majority of her life campaigning for humane treatment of the mentally ill. Beginning her work in the 1840s, Dix found that those admitted to asylums were often uncared for and abused. She also realized that the asylums had no regulation and very little funding from the government. Lobbying in both state legislature and Congress, Dix argued that the United States mental health care system needed to be reformed in order to benefit its patients. Her efforts were successful, and she soon witnessed the opening of the first government-funded asylums.⁸

Despite the establishment of government-funded asylums in the United States, the cruel treatment of the mentally ill continued for over a century. From the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, asylums were said to be disgustingly dirty, and the patients were said to be treated more like prisoners. In addition, patients continued to experience cruel treatments at the hands of the asylum's staff. A common treatment utilized in many American asylums was the act of taking patients and completely submerging them in a bathtub filled with freezing water. This technique was meant to cleanse the patient of their unhealthy thoughts. Furthermore, electroshock therapy was extremely popular during this time. When undergoing electroshock therapy, patients would be placed in a chair and receive the full force of an electrical shock into their brains. Since there were no precautions taken to protect the patients from the shock, memory loss and bodily harm were common.⁹

In 1935, doctors believed that they had discovered an effective treatment for the mentally ill: the lobotomy. During a lobotomy, doctors surgically removed the frontal lobe from a patient's brain to subdue them. However, not long after the first lobotomies were performed, the doctors noticed that the procedure had adverse side effects. Instead of just becoming calmer versions of themselves, many patients lost their entire personalities. They no longer had feelings, motivation, maturity, or impulse control. For these reasons, lobotomies were eventually outlawed in the late 1960s.¹⁰

Nearly fifteen years after the first lobotomy, the first psychoactive drugs were developed and prescribed. Psychoactive drugs are chemical substances that help to improve the feelings and thoughts of a mentally ill person. The very first psychoactive drug, lithium, was created in 1949. This drug was groundbreaking in the field of psychology, as studies showed that it was effective in treating the symptoms of mental illness rather than simply sedating a patient. As time progressed, more psychoactive drugs, such as Chlorpromazine, Valium, Prozac, Paxil, Zoloft, and Luvox, were successfully prescribed to treat a variety of mental illnesses.¹¹

The end of the government-funded asylums came in 1963, when President Kennedy signed the Mental Retardation Facilities and Community Health Centers Constitution Act. This act supported community mental health centers rather than asylums through government-issued funding. Soon after the act was put into place, large asylums closed in a process called deinstitutionalization, allowing the mentally ill to seek mental health care near the comforts of their own homes.¹²

Today, medical treatment for the mentally ill has become a vital part of the American healthcare system, making sure those with mental illnesses are treated with respect and dignity. In nearly every town in the United States and Western Europe, counselors and psychologists are available to help people cope

6 Ibid

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid

9 Ibid

10 Allison M. Foerschner, "The History of Mental Illness: From 'Skull Drills' to 'Happy Pills'," *Inquiries Journal* 2, no. 9 (2010): 1-4. <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1673>.

11 Ibid

12 Psychology OpenStax College

with and learn how to manage their mental illnesses. Psychologists focus on psychotherapy and teaching coping skills. They have been involved in schools, universities, hospitals, prisons, and a number of workplaces. In addition to psychologists, psychiatrists are medically-trained doctors that serve to prescribe psychoactive drugs to patients. In hospitals, there are still psychiatric wards, but they are only for patients who are in imminent danger of harming others or themselves. Most patients can only stay in the psych ward for seventy-two hours before they are released into the custody of family members or into another mental health facility. If they choose to go to a mental health facility, they will spend a few months in a safe, clean environment with various mental health professionals. There, patients will learn how to care for themselves and overcome their illnesses. Overall, those who suffer from mental illnesses today have many opportunities to be a part of society and live a life full of happiness, despite their diagnoses.¹³

As the treatment of the mentally ill evolved, Western people have begun to move away from their staunch religious views on suicide and have begun to view it as a sign that the victim may have suffered from a mental illness. According to studies performed by the University of Washington School of Social Work, over 90 percent of suicide victims suffer from mental illnesses, demonstrating that having a mental illness of any kind increases a person's chance of committing suicide.¹⁴ For these reasons, modern Western society tends to view suicide in a sympathetic manner, caring more about the state of the person's mental health than their chances of attaining eternal life. Since society's feelings about suicide have changed, the ways in which people respond to suicides have also reformed. In the past, the topic of suicide was taboo, and anyone who committed one was punished through an improper burial. However, in the twenty-first century, people talk openly about suicide, which raises awareness and helps prevent future suicides.¹⁵

There are many ways in which people bring attention to the issue of suicide. One way is to educate individuals about the risk factors and warning signs

of potentially suicidal thoughts or actions. Some risk factors that people are taught to be aware of include a person's current mental health, substance abuse, loss of a job or relationship, exposure to other suicide victims, and feelings of hopelessness. Similarly, some warning signs are severe mood swings, isolation from society, reckless behavior, and comments regarding self-harm.¹⁶ By learning to recognize and identify these symptoms, people can help someone struggling with suicidal thoughts before it is too late.

In addition to educating the general public, around-the-clock resources are in place to help people considering suicide. For example, numerous suicide hotlines allow a person to seek psychological help anonymously over the phone. Additionally, crisis centers exist in nearly every town, where people considering suicide have access to counselors who can give them immediate support and assist them in establishing a long-term treatment plan. Furthermore, those who have already attempted suicide have plentiful resources. Once they recover from their injuries, surviving suicide victims can choose to enter a treatment center for a number of months. Here, they will be monitored, given access to counseling, and treated for their mental illness until they are ready to seek treatment outside of the facility.¹⁷ With these numerous resources in place for those at risk, Western society is encouraging those who are suicidal to seek treatment.

Many times, the families of suicide victims contribute to the efforts being made to prevent suicide in honor of their family member. For example, when both Jason Arkin and Sara Prideaux committed suicide in 2015, their families came together to form the Speak Up Foundation. With the main goal of bringing suicide education and awareness to communities around the United States, the Speak Up Foundation participates in multiple activities to spread their message. In high schools, they send a suicide survivor to speak to the students with the hope that it will inspire those with suicidal thoughts to get help. Through donations, the foundation makes it possible for teachers to receive suicide awareness training. Outside of schools, the Speak Up Foundation set up a campaign

13 Ibid

14 University of Washington School of Social Work, "Facts About Mental Illness and Suicide." *Mental Health Reporting- UW School of Social Work*, University of Washington School of Social Work, 2018. depts.washington.edu/mhreport/facts_suicide.php.

15 Ibid

16 National Suicide Prevention Hotline, "We Can All Prevent Suicide," 2018. suicidepreventionlifeline.org/how-we-can-all-prevent-suicide/.

17 Ibid

called *You Be You*, which creates merchandise that emphasize uniqueness rather than perfection. The money that is made on these products goes directly back into the foundation to fund their other efforts. Lastly, Speak Up holds a walk in the founders' hometown in Kansas to raise the entire community's awareness on suicide.¹⁸ By setting up a foundation, not only are the families of suicide victims helping in the fight against suicide, but they are also memorializing their family member in a manner that is healthy for them.

Every day, new efforts to prevent suicides are made. Most recently, the popular social media website Twitter hosted an open discussion on depression and suicide for teens, sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health. Teens were able to learn about the symptoms of depression and suicide, as well as ask any personal questions that they had during this discussion.¹⁹ In addition to their collaboration with Twitter, the National Institute of Mental Health is currently funding research efforts to reduce the extremely high suicide rates in children of Native American and Alaskan descent.²⁰ With new measures like these being created daily, Western society shows that it will continue to provide resources to help suicide victims. Hence, as our society moves forward, the sympathetic viewing of suicide will become widely accepted.

Ultimately, the change from viewing suicide as a mortal sin to a sign that a person needs help with issues of mental illness has greatly benefitted Western cultures. While Westerners of the past were preoccupied with pleasing God and punishing those who disobeyed Him, Westerners of the present are more concerned with helping others to overcome their struggles. Not only does helping others allow the people in the community to be happier and healthier individuals, but it also allows them to feel that their peers will support them. Therefore, with the shift in ideas regarding suicide over time, the Western world has become a healthier and stronger community.

18 Speak Up, "You Be You Youth Campaign," Speak Up Foundation, 2015. <http://speakup.us/helpandresources/teen-campaign/>

19 NIMH Institute Update, "NIMH to Host Twitter Chat on Teen Depression," *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 16 Apr. 2018. www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2018/nimh-to-host-twitter-chat-on-teen-depression.shtml.

20 NIMH Science Update, "Hubs Help Native American Communities Address Youth Suicide," *National Institute of Mental Health*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-news/2018/hubs-help-native-american-communities-address-youth-suicide.shtml.

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