

# THE LANGUAGE OF SUICIDE: PREVENTION AND STIGMA

Words have immense power. How we talk about emotions, behaviours and ideas has a strong influence over what we think about them – and how we make others think. The words we choose are more important than you might think and create an emotional impact. The only way we

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can change how society talks about suicide starts with us as doctors and mental health practitioners. If we change the way we as medical professionals refer or talk about suicide, we can help destigmatise it in our communities.

In South Africa, as the rest of the world, suicide is a growing concern. For the 15 – 24 age group, suicide is the second leading cause of death. For teens, 9.5% of their deaths are due to suicide. Children as young as six have died by suicide and every hour someone takes their life. For every suicide there are approximately 20 attempts. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention report, between 6 and 32 people are

*directly* affected by each suicide.

Suicide is not a word people like to say - it makes us uncomfortable. I have openly spoken about mental health, depression and suicide for many years and there's a marked awkwardness/taboo around the subject. Many people feel their questions will make things worse – that just by asking questions around suicide or if someone has a plan to kill themselves it will trigger them to start planning or activate emergency response units. We as mental health professionals have the ability to notice things, show care and concern, and to connect people at risk to professional help.

Despite all those who have experienced the loss of a loved one to suicide or have been in that suicidal place themselves, this is still not a topic openly discussed. The stigma associated with suicide is very real. At the heart of the misunderstanding, ignorance and fear is language. "He committed suicide"; "Hannah successfully committed suicide after years of failed attempts" and "She'd always been attention seeking".

We need a strict review of the way we talk about suicide. The language we currently use to report on or discuss suicide is insensitive, stigmatising, disrespectful and dated. The word 'commit' comes from a time when suicide was treated as a crime. Yet we still talk of people like they committed a crime when they die by suicide. "We now live in a world where we seek to understand people who experience suicidal thoughts, behaviours and attempts. We need to treat



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them with compassion rather than condemn them. Part of this is to use appropriate, non-stigmatising terminology when referring to suicide,” says suicide prevention adviser, Susan Beaton.

As we learn more about suicide, our language must evolve. Depression warps our sense of who we are, our sense of worth and value, and takes away our ability to see the future. SADAG runs the only suicide crisis line in South Africa (0800 567 567) and their counselling call centre receives as many as 600 calls a day. We need to be compassionate and sensitive when we talk to someone who is suicidal. In an unclear state of bereavement, survivors of suicide loss often wonder if they could have done something to prevent the death; they wonder if they contributed to their loved one’s actions. Their self-blame and guilt runs deep. We need to reach out to survivors of suicide loss – to understand how traumatic that kind of loss is – and try to ease their guilt and suffering.

While we can never be 100% sure what causes anyone to take their own life, we can ingrain more empathetic, less stigmatising language. Language matters so choose your words carefully:

**Commit Suicide:** The word ‘commits’ is associated with crime – he committed murder. The preferred

term is ‘died by suicide’ because it emphasises the death and avoids judgment about the means.

**Successful Suicide:** You wouldn’t say “the assailant successfully raped the victim.” A suicide death is a tragedy, not a success.

**Attention-Seeking:** Few suicide-related concepts are more dangerous than the idea that suicidal behaviour should be discounted as ‘attention-seeking’. Communicating about how you’re feeling and seeing the future is very hard to put into words. Too often we don’t listen to cries for help and a person in distress communicates through action. Rather than labelling these behaviours, we should explore the meaning behind any suicide attempt.

**A permanent solution to a temporary problem:** We often hear this phrase and while it’s usually intended to suggest there’s hope, that depression can be treated, the phrase is also judgmental in that it suggests an over-reaction to a problem. It’s important to acknowledge a person’s pain as real. We can’t promise there will be an instant solution, or that everything will be ok with the snap of our fingers, but we can tell them they’re not alone.

Research has proven that even small, subtle changes in language and in the words and phrases we use can have an impact. People affected by suicide are vulnerable. They realistically fear the reactions of others. The more we can use language that accurately and sensitively describes suicide, the more we encourage a healthy and respectful way to talk about suicide.

Words not only influence people’s perception towards us or our ideas but they can change the way we see things. The words we use can build a picture of hope and acceptance; or despair and rejection. When we’re talking about suicide, those words can be a matter of life or death.

One of the challenges I face as a medical doctor is explaining to parents, caregivers and patients what suicide is and how it comes about. As a person living with Depression, I can tell them that Depression is a chemical imbalance in the brain and it comes to a point where the chemical balance is so low in your brain that you start experiencing suicidal thoughts. It’s important for them to understand this as there are deep feelings of guilt, sadness and hopelessness that come with it. It is a chemical imbalance that can be fixed with medical intervention, psychotherapy and possible hospital admission. **MHM**

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SAY THIS	INSTEAD OF THIS
Died of suicide	Committed Suicide
Suicide death	Successful attempt
Suicide attempt	Unsuccessful attempt
Person living with suicidal thoughts or behaviour	Suicide ideator or attempter
Suicide	Completed suicide
(Describe the behaviour)	Manipulative, cry for help, or suicide gesture
Working with	Dealing with suicidal crisis