

Social Stigma and Suicide

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I have heard people claim that suicidal persons or, rather, persons in a crisis, do not seek the help that they need because of the social stigma involved in doing so. I believe, however, that such reasoning relies upon unsupported assumptions. I do not deny that there is a social stigma associated with mental illness, nor do I deny that such a stigma creates barriers that either prevent or discourage a person from seeking the help that he needs. Rather, I believe that appeals to social stigma as the primary, underlying reason why persons in need do not seek help is much too simplistic. I find this view to be flawed for at least two reasons.

First, such reasoning assumes that a person in a crisis takes herself to be in need of help. Certainly the belief that one is faced with what appears to be an insurmountable problem (or problems) is one thing. But the belief that one can actually obtain the help necessary to alleviate one's problem (or problems) is something quite different. Acknowledging this difference could just as easily place the lack of a person's ability to seek help to be the result of failing to believe that help is, indeed, available. Therefore, focusing solely upon social stigma here ignores (or at least severely discounts) the profound power of despair that a person in a crisis may be experiencing.

Second, another underlying assumption here is that a person in a crisis cares about what others might think. While such persons may assume that they already know what others will think, it may be difficult (at best) for other such persons in a crisis to see beyond the crisis that they are experiencing. For example, in the classic movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey was given the opportunity to see what life would be like for others had he never been born.¹ Subsequently, it was his recognition of the positive influence that his life had on his family and friends that made him want to live again (even if, as he believed, he'd be going to jail). Sometimes being in a crisis is akin to wearing blinders. In such cases, help may not be sought because how one's life impacts others (or even that there are others who may be of help to one) is simply unseen. Hence, to assume that, in general, persons in a crisis do not seek help because of the social stigma associated with doing so is too quick of an assumption to make insofar as it may rely upon an inaccurate view of a person's mental state.

In sum, I believe that there may be many factors in place – apart from social stigma – that either prevent or discourage a person in a crisis from seeking help. Ironically, trying to understand these factors is an important (albeit neglected) step towards actually combating the social stigma associated with mental illness.

¹ Capra, Frank (1946). *It's a Wonderful Life*. Liberty Films.

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