

A LINE ON LIFE

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A Bridge to 1000 *

David A. Gershaw, Ph.D.

The **Golden Gate Bridge** was viewed as "*practically suicide-proof*." Unfortunately, since it was opened in 1937, about 1000 people – more or less – have committed suicide by jumping off that bridge. Looming about 250 feet above San Francisco Bay, the bridge seems to have a magnetic attraction for those considering suicide. This includes some who might not have killed themselves under different conditions.

Only three months after the bridge was opened, Harold B. Wobber, 47 years old, handed his coat to an acquaintance. Wobber announced, "*This is where I get off. I'm going to jump*." Although the companion tried to stop him, Wobber fell to his death in San Francisco Bay. Since that first suicide, it is hard to tell how many people have died by jumping off the bridge. Official records may not include many people who have anonymously met their end in the murky waters.

Newspaper headlines are reserved for unique cases. The oldest suicide was 87, while the youngest to die was only 5. As the number of deaths mounted, it neared 500 in 1973. After what was believed to be number 499, 14 people tried to be number "500." One was even wearing a T-shirt with "500" printed on it. Fortunately, all 14 suicides were prevented. Even so, later that year, a 26-year-old man managed to jump to his death. Officials are again concerned, as the death toll hovers around 1000.

The Golden Gate Bridge is not the only architectural wonder to attract suicidal people. Between 1930-1950, the Empire State Building had 16 people jump to their deaths. However, since then, suicides have been prevented by an impassable fence constructed on the observation tower.

Similar barriers have not been constructed on the Golden Gate Bridge. Some say it is too expensive, while others believed the barriers would be ugly. Most people thought the barriers would be ineffective. Even if barriers did prevent people from jumping off the bridge, many thought that those who couldn't jump would find another means for their untimely end.

However, this last statement is unlikely. Only about 5% of suicide attempts are made by those who are certain they want to die. The vast majority are **ambivalent** – they don't want to die, but they view dying as the only way to get rid of their pain. Of those who fail in their first suicide attempt, only about 10% kill themselves at some later time.

The majority of suicide attempts are made by those who are **depressed** and **socially isolated**. The depression is often caused by being unable to function well. They may have been injured in an accident or notified that they had some crippling illness – heart disease, cancer or AIDS. If also isolated from social support, the thought of going on might be too painful to endure.

Although each case is unique, suicidal people often give clues as to their intent. They may actually say that they "*want to end it all*." Others give away cherished possessions, set their affairs in order, or suddenly make out a will. If previously depressed, the person might snap out of their depression, because they now have a fatal solution to their problems.

**Even without formal training,
a caring friend can prevent a suicide attempt.**

If you become aware of someone's suicidal tendencies – even though you are not a trained professional – there is much you can do to keep them from committing suicide.

- **Ask them if they intend to commit suicide.** (Discussing suicide will not put the idea into their mind. This is a myth.) If you can find out *how* they plan to commit suicide, the plan can be aborted by removing the method. (At the Golden Gate Bridge, a policeman threatened a potential jumper, "Come down or I'll shoot!" Wanting to die only by his own method, the jumper meekly climbed back to the street level. However, you don't need to threaten to shoot.) For example, if the plan involves crashing a favored car, taking the car keys will probably abort the suicide attempt.
- **Listen to their problems with empathy.** Just having someone close to them who will listen to their problems may be all the person needs. Try to see the world through their eyes – to understand *why* they are considering suicide. Empathetic listening means *withholding* any judgment or advice. Giving advice (such as, "Things aren't as bad as they seem.") is not helpful to someone considering suicide.
- **Make an appointment.** If they promise to meet you at a specified time and place, this can help in two ways. First – even when considering suicide – many people are unwilling to break their promises. This delays the suicide attempt. Second, during that period, the situation may change, offering some positive options rather than suicide.
- **Get them professional help.** You can give them information about professional sources of help, but it is even better if you accompany them to contact someone.

Even if these hints do not work, you will have done your best. Nobody can do better than that. If you have been affected by a suicide, this quote may be helpful.

"Remember, whoever you may be – professional helper, friend or lover – we cannot solve the problems of others, nor can we make decisions for them. We can only respect and care for them, offering ourselves as a calm, stable fellow traveler who reaches out to their own core of stability. Given this much, they will do the rest, usually (though not always) choosing life."

* Adapted from Jeff Stryker, "An Awful Milestone for the Golden Gate Bridge," *Themes of the Times: Abnormal Psychology*, Prentice Hall, Fall, 1996, page 11. Originally printed in *The New York Times*, July 9, 1995.