

EDITORIAL: Talking About Suicide — You Are Not Alone

One young person kills him- or herself every 46 minutes in this country. Suicide is the third leading cause of death for teenagers, after motor vehicle accidents and other unintentional injuries.

The overall picture is bleak, too. In 1995, for instance, there were more than 31,000 suicides, spanning all age groups in the United States — approximately one every 17 minutes. The suicide rate in this country has tripled since 1952. Every year there are more suicides than homicides.

Most people who commit suicide don't really want to die. Rather, they want to put an end to their unbearable emotional pain, and death seems to be the only way out. Too often, people who want to kill themselves are so distressed that they don't realize that they have other options. Generally, they feel isolated and alienated; they may feel that they have no one to talk to or ask for help.

Of course, Buddhism teaches that death doesn't put an end to our suffering. The only way we can truly triumph over suffering is to fight our way through it, determined to win.

Nichiren Daishonin writes: "The idea that life and death are two is the reasoning of dreams, deluded and inverted. If when wide awake we examine our true nature, we will find no beginning that requires our being born and no end that requires our dying. What we will find is the essence of life, which can neither be burned by apocalyptic flames, nor worn away by flood, nor cut down by sword, nor pierced by arrow." (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 563)

Commenting on this passage in *Life: An Enigma, a Precious Jewel*, SGI President Ikeda writes: "Recently I was asked whether a person weary of life might escape it all by committing suicide or by paying someone else to kill him. The answer, which is no, is implicit in the above quotation.... Since all forms of life exist originally and concurrently with the universe, they are undestroyable.... The self is imperishable, and suffering does not cease with death."

Also, in terms of cause and effect, suicide is a cause that actually aggravates future suffering.

Regardless of this, suicidal thoughts and feelings are fairly common. And they're nothing to be ashamed of. Talking about our feelings about suicide can promote understanding and reduce the distress and isolation that we sometimes feel. For example, if you're talking with a friend who is severely depressed, it's OK to ask, "Are you hurting so much that you might think of killing yourself?" This gives the person an opportunity to talk about his or her feelings, an opportunity for you both to talk about alternatives to suicide and reasons to live.

(It's important to take all threats of suicide seriously. Sometimes a friend may be feeling down and just needs someone to talk to. But sometimes, you may sense that a person is threatening suicide just to get attention from you. It's advisable to refer such a person to a professional suicide hotline in your area.)

Also, if we have experienced suicidal feelings ourselves, by talking honestly about those feelings we can encourage others, helping all of us to see that we have options and aren't alone. For example, one SGI-USA leader has said that he used to feel suicidal, but he overcame those feelings by cultivating a new interest in life — listening to music, eating good food, enjoying the outdoors, watching good movies and reading good books. Eventually, as he discovered new, interesting things in the world, he found something valuable inside himself. One member said that she was feeling suicidal and went to a

museum, where she saw a painting that renewed her interest in art and her enthusiasm for life.

In the movie *To Live*, set in China during the cultural revolution, a character accidentally kills his best friend's young son. As the years go by, this man's life goes from bad to worse. One night, he shows up on his friend's doorstep. His wife has committed suicide, and he plans to do the same. "I can't go on," he cries.

"You just have to!" his best friend tells him.

And the mother of the boy who was killed adds: "Remember, you owe us a life. You have to value yours."

When we feel as if we can't go on, we have to value our lives. This is the Buddhist spirit to never give up in the most fundamental sense.

Although people who commit suicide may think that no one cares about them, their friends and family are often devastated by the act. In addition to grief over the person's death, they may be left with anger, guilt, resentment and distress over unresolved issues. What's more, they often feel stigmatized and are usually reluctant to talk about their feelings. Sometimes, they start to have suicidal thoughts themselves, suicide even leading to suicide.

Anger, guilt, resentment, distress — it may be natural to feel all of these things, but it's important to acknowledge that the person who committed suicide is responsible for his or her choice. As Buddhists, we can chant for his or her suffering to go away; our prayers affect a loved one's karma and life-condition even after death. And we can chant to create value from our own suffering, as well. Perhaps the best way to cope with a loved one's suicide is to value our own lives all the more.

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