

Can happiness cause suicide?

Saxby Pridmore¹, Ahmed Naguy², William Pridmore³

¹College of Medicine and Health, University of Tasmania, Australia; ²Kuwait Centre for Mental Health, Shuwaikh, Kuwait; ³Tasmanian Health Service, Tasmania, Australia.

Correspondence: Prof. Saxby Pridmore Email: s.pridmore@utas.edu.au

Received: 5/11/2021; **Revised:** 22/11/21; **Accepted:** 25/11/2021

Key words: suicide, mental disorder, suffering.

[citation: Pridmore, Saxby., Naguy, Ahmed., & Pridmore, William (2021). Can happiness cause suicide? Dynamics of Human Health (DHH), 8(4): http://journalofhealth.co.nz/?page_id=2627]

Abstract

Suicide is poorly understood. We explore occasional statements linking suicide and a state of happiness. We conclude that, unsurprisingly, they refer to the ambition to avoid unhappiness.

Introduction

Since the early 19th century, the medical profession has claimed that all suicide is the result of mental disorder (probably with the best of intentions). This is incorrect, and was debunked by the WHO in 2013. A large number of motives lead to suicide – sure, the avoidance of the suffering of mental disorder is one (1). But, “ordinary” sadness, such as that associated with the loss of lover (e.g. Cleopatra) is a well-known trigger. The loss of a fortune is another. The loss of liberty and reputation (public disgrace) may lead to suicide (e.g. Jeffrey Epstein). It is well accepted that severe, intractable physical pain may motivate suicide, and many states have now organized services to assist in the process. ‘Tedium vitae’ is the term applied when a person, particularly an older person, often with some physical pain, usually with some loss of loved ones, perhaps with failing eyesight or mobility decides they are ‘tired of life’ and want to end their life, with or without assistance.

Sometimes younger people are encountered who want to end their lives for no apparent reason. It is tempting to believe they have a mental disorder which has no other symptoms – there is no sleep disturbance, no loss of weight, no convincing low mood – but only a persisting wish to no longer exist. Perhaps this has to do with the personality or constitution of the individual – just as there are people born with an interest in tight-rope walking, antique cars, and polar exploration – this inexplicable desire is born out of the nature of that unusual individual.

So, suicide may be associated with various losses, failures and painful/mental states, and sometimes the reasons are not apparent (humans are complicated). The question comes to mind, “Can happiness cause suicide?” If so, that would substantiate that suicide is complex.

Some relevant material will be presented and discussed.

Possible examples

1.

William Shakespeare – widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's greatest dramatist – had an unsurpassed understanding of human nature. His 38 plays

(and poetry) are frequently used to illustrate aspects of human nature – hubris, desire, blind ambition, true connection among others. So, we should respect his thinking.

Othello, a tragedy of sexual jealousy, was first performed in 1604. It concerns an African general in the Venetian army (it is also a pioneering exploration of racial prejudice). Desdemona, a Venetian beauty, is married to Othello – when he is deployed to Cypress, she accompanies him. On the way, Othello and Desdemona travel on different ships, there is a powerful story, the Turkish fleet (enemy) is concurrently at sea and many Turkish ships are sunk.

Desdemona reaches Cypress first and there is concern that Othello's ship may have sunk. But, then he arrives, alive and well. (Act 2 Scene 1)

Othello:

“I'm amazed you got here before me.
But I'm overjoyed! My love, if the calm
after the storm could always be this
wonderful, I'd want the wind to blow
until it waked the dead, and whipped
up waves as tall as mountains! If I
died right now I'd be completely
happy, since I'll probably never be as
happy as this again in my life.” (2)

Well, Othello is a fictional character, he does not die and he is talking of simply dying rather than committing suicide – nevertheless, he is talking of great happiness/bliss and the revelation that if his life ended, he would die happy and confident that things could not get better and could certainly deteriorate. Perhaps he was feeling that his life was complete, and to die at this point would preserve this moment.

2.

Kurt Vonnegut was a humanist writer of fiction, nonfiction, short stories and plays. His style was idiosyncratic, being described as “absurdist non-linear” and “metafiction”. In his last novel, *Timequake* (3), published in 1997 (ten years before his death) he told a favourite story – that when the famous African American jazz pianist Fats Waller was particularly pleased with his work, he would shout, “Somebody shoot me while I'm happy!”

Jane Goldberg spent her life studying tap dancing. She titled her biography (published in 2008), *Shoot Me While I'm Happy* (4). She explains, this was an old vaudeville (early 20th century style of entertainment) expression.

Again, these utterances concern death (not suicide). They are closely related to the experience of Othello – one interpretation is that the moment is positive, and the individual wishes to avoid inevitable negative moments. It is unlikely these individuals were influenced by Shakespeare – the fact that they seem to be thinking similarly, four hundred years later, suggests this is a way humans think.

3.

Terence was a Roman African comedy playwright who lived in Rome. Although he died at 25 years of age, he wrote 6 plays of the highest standard which influenced both Dante and Shakespeare.

In his play *Eunuchus* (161 BCE), Chaerea returns from military service and falls in love. In Act 3 Scene 5 he says, “O supreme Jupiter! Now assuredly is the time for me to meet my death, when I can so well endure it; lest my life should sully this ecstasy with some disaster” (5).

This is similar to the words of *Othello*, written 1500 years later – during an episode of great happiness, death (not suicide, exactly) is welcomed as it will prevent the ‘ecstasy’ being lost.

4.

Henry Miller was an American novelist (“a freewheeling iconoclast”) who passionately reviled modern civilization and adulated the Bohemian life. He published *The Colossus of Maroussi* in 1941 – describing his travels in Greece and his love of the frantic disorder of the place.

He wrote, “Christ, I was happy. But for the first time in my life I was happy with the full consciousness of being happy. It’s good to be just plain happy; it’s a little better to know you’re happy; but to understand that you’re happy and know why and how, in what way, because of what concatenation of events or circumstances, and still be happy, be happy in the being and knowing, well that is beyond happiness, this is bliss, and if you have any sense you ought to kill yourself on the spot and be done with it.” (6)

Discussion/Conclusion

Life can be tough, as *The Book of Common Prayer* confirms: “Man that is born of woman hath a short time to live, and life is full of misery” (7). But, there is a mechanism which enables the avoidance of misery, as Sir Thomas Browne (1605-82) contended: “We are in the power of no calamity while death is in our own”.

Many of us (including those of us who have never experienced a suicidal thought) have experienced the sudden urge to jump from a high place or drive into the path of an oncoming car. This is often interpreted as an inexplicable and unexpected urge to complete suicide. However, this “high place phenomenon” (HPP) (8) is more often the urge to remain safe! Recognizing the potential danger of the situation the person experiences autonomic arousal and fright and makes an avoidance response. The individual then misinterprets the event as a distressing expression of suicidal intention – but the opposite is usually the case.

Returning to the question: “Can happiness cause suicide?” We could discover no account of happiness triggering completed suicide. However, above we list two fictional characters, Othello (2) and Chaerea (5) who were very happy and would accept death rather than lose the emotion. One actual individual, Fats Waller, is reported (3) to have made such a statement, but this could not be independently confirmed. Henry Miller made this claim in a personal account of a period of his life (6), and Jane Goldberg made *Shoot Me While I’m Happy* the title of her biography (4).

We believe this not to be a corollary of the HPP, where there are opposite motivations being misinterpreted. Instead, the issue is clearly expressed in all cases – there is a moment of bliss and the individual states they would rather die immediately (at this high point), in the words of Terence, “lest my life should sully this ecstasy with some disaster”.

These statements extoll the pleasure of happiness – but they tell of the desolation at the other pole of human experience just as powerfully. They express a human desire to avoid sadness.

“For all the happiness mankind can gain
Is not in pleasure, but in rest from pain.”

John Dryden 1631-1700

Human behaviour/emotional experience is dynamic. The quote by John Dryden is double sided – it could be interpreted as pain being a break from happiness! As sure as night follows day, happiness and sadness follow each other – life does not stay the same! When we are sad we may wish for death as relief - but we might also believe that happiness could be just around the corner. Certainly, when we are happy, we know sadness is probably not far away and we may wish to preserve the moment, alas in death.

Given the dynamics of human experience, what influences the behaviour of the individual in one way today may produce different behaviour tomorrow. A sage may suggest that happiness should be accepted as something which may be temporary but will return.

1. Pridmore S, Pridmore W. Suicide in writing across time and place. In S Shahtahmasebi, H Omar (Eds). *The Broader View of Suicide*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2020. Pages 42-70.
2. Shakespeare W. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*. London: Thomas Walkley. 1622, page 9.
3. Vonnegut, Jr. K. *Timequake*. New York: Putnam Publishing Group. 1997
4. Goldberg J. *Shoot Me While I'm Happy – Memories from the Tap Goddess of the Lower East Side*. New York: Changing Times Tap Dancing Co, Inc. 2008.
5. Terence. *Eunuchus*. Rome. 161 BCE.
6. Miller H. *The Colossus of Maroussi*. London: Secker and Warburg. 1945. Pages 12-13.
7. Church of England. *The Book of Common Prayer*. Cambridge: John Baskerville. 1762.
8. Hames J, Ribeiro J, Smith A, Joiner T. An urge to jump affirms the urge to live: an empirical examination of the high place phenomenon. *J Affect Disord* 2012; 136(3): 1114-20.