

UNIT 1

SUICIDE

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

Human life is basically a gift from God and it remains the same no matter how much pain and suffering it may bring at one stage or another of its continued existence. This unit presents the meaning, the philosophical and moral implications of suicide in view of some philosophers and religions.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Life is a mystery to live. God has created us to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to us which He has not committed to another. We have our role or mission in the world. We are a link in a chain. We have a purpose in our life. We are unique and irreplaceable. There is a bond of connection between persons. God does nothing in vain. Life is a gift from God (Supreme Master/Author of life) and we hand it back to Him at the appointed time. Life is authentic only when it is received as a gift, as grace. Life is a precious gift, but really also teaches us that it includes its share of pain, suffering and the cross. Life just is, and we have to learn to make peace with ourselves and with our lives just as they are. In the meantime, suicide is part of our earliest collective social, cultural, and religious memory. Art, myth, and religious symbols in nearly every culture include images of and construct meanings for self-killing. From earliest human history, suicide and religion are inescapably joined. Anthropological evidence shows self-killing has always been a part of human experience. It appears to be a fundamental part of collective human self-consciousness. As human society increased in complexity, so did the role and meaning of taking one's life. The history of culture shows that suicide has had a variety of meanings across time and culture. This unit presents the inquiry concerning the motives underlying a man's decision to take his own life and the moral responsibility.

1.2 DEFINITION

Suicide is a term derived from the Latin word *suicidium*, meaning the taking of one's own life. Latin word *sui* means self and *cide* means kill. Therefore, suicide means "an intentional act of

self killing". Suicide is the act by which a person directly, knowingly and freely brings about his or her own death. This presentation is not concerned with those suicides that moral theologians call indirect, nor with those persons who take their own lives in a state of mental abnormality or who cannot be held responsible for their actions. Suicide is direct when one has the intention of causing one's own death as a thing desired for its own sake (as when death is preferred to the meaninglessness of life) or as means to an end (as when one hangs himself to avoid persecution).

Suicide must be distinguished from the placing of one's life in danger for a sufficient reason as might be true in the case of military men, police, firemen, doctors, and others whose duty calls upon them to risk their lives in the service of others. However, even in these cases due precautions should be observed. In these instances the individual does not desire his own death but rather endangers his life for a greater good.

There is no circumstance which justifies suicide, although emotional situations may be described in which self-inflicted death may save a woman's honor, be the salvation of one's companions, protect national security, or release the individual from torture or a life of pain. In none of these instances, and in no other, is suicide justifiable. On the other hand, in many cases of suicide, the person may be severely disturbed emotionally and hence may not be responsible for his act.

Suicides are of two types: conventional and personal. Conventional suicides occur as a result of tradition and the force of public opinion. Thus, among some tradition-ruled peoples, when certain, situations arise, suicide is inexorably demanded. Notable example in India is the *sathie* of the Indian widow who was forced to immolate herself by cremation on the funeral pyre of her husband.

Check Your Progress I

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What is suicide?

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1.3. PHILOSOPHICAL VIEWS

We shall discuss the philosophical views of Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Donne, David Hume and Immanuel Kant on suicide.

Plato (427-347 B.C.)

The *Phaedo* presents Plato's most elaborate discussion of the immortality of the soul and the implications of that belief for human behavior. In a brief exchange at the beginning of the dialogue, Socrates is asked to explain the absolute ban on suicide advocated by the Pythagoreans and other religious teachers, and to reconcile it with his own opinion that death may sometime be preferable to life. Socrates restates what he understands the religious teaching to be: life is not ours to do with as we will because we have been placed in a kind of "prison" or "guard post" by the gods and therefore not free to run away. He says that while this doctrine is easy to understand, it does seem correct to him that the gods are guardians that we are but their possessions. Plato teaches that the political community must be reminded that suicide is a grave offense against its good order and the wishes of gods.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1) Why one cannot kill himself?

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2) What is the relation between an individual and society?

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Aristotle (384 – 322 B. C.)

Plato's general condemnation of suicide is supported by his student Aristotle, who shares with his teacher the preeminent position as the head of the Western philosophical tradition. According to Aristotle, suicide is an injustice against the political community whose existence is essential to one's own well-being. (Cfr. *Nichomachean Ethics*)

The Stoics

The stoics justified suicide. In a philosophy so profoundly materialistic and deterministic, there was no room for the concept of personal immortality.

Augustine (354-420)

Augustine reinforces Plato's objection to suicide with a forceful reminder to Christians of their duty to obey the commands of the one true God and to endure suffering in imitation of Jesus Christ. He was the first to set the argument down more or less systematically in one place, weaving it from pagan and scriptural sources alike to form what might be called the base-line Christian case against suicide. For centuries after his death, his argument exerted strong influence over the development of Western thought, customs and law.

St Augustine treats the question of suicide with fine irony and even bad temper. The Donatists with their practice of suicide, inspired by ignoble religious motives, made him lose his cool. He sees every suicide as an objective murder. The cases related in the Old Testament have no moral force in the New. Such suicidal episodes are related as historical events which happen but which are to be condemned in themselves. They fall into the class of events narrated in Scripture so that they can be judged, not so that they may be imitated. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *Epist.*, 204, 6-7 in PL 33, 941.) There is no pretext by which suicide can be justified, not even for the avoidance of sin or in order to put an end to a painful and unfortunate life. Those who toy with the idea of suicide with the excuse of safeguarding virginity and other ethical virtues he castigates as fools and madmen. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* I, 26 in PL 41, 40; *Epist.*, 204, 5 in PL 33, 940.) Suicide cannot be seen as an act of Christian fortitude, but rather as a lack of it, since fortitude 'has the characteristic function of guiding and strengthening man in adversity'. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XIX, 4, 5 in PL 41, 630-631.) But what, he asks, is to be said of those holy women who, to save themselves from being violated by their torturers, threw themselves into the river? Augustine admits that the Church has honoured them, but displays considerable caution and reserve on the issue. If what tradition teaches about such women is correct, their recognition by the Church be justified if they had some extraordinary reason, such as the intervention of some special inspiration on the part of God, by virtue of which these material suicides could be judged morally as acts of heroic obedience to the Almighty. Such a possibility cannot be entirely discounted, but Augustine is doubtful about whether it would have applied in the cases related, which handed down by oral tradition to Eusebius of Caesarea. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* XIX, 26 in PL 41, 39.)

Leaving such cases aside, anyone who consciously and deliberately takes his or her life is always culpable. Those who plot against their own lives despoil themselves of moral innocence in advance so that, when they die, they do not die innocent, but guilty of the act they bring about. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium* I, 13, 14 in PL 43, 711-712.) As we have seen, Augustine admits the possibility of a strange command from God which might have to be obeyed at the cost of taking one's own life, but he adds with heavy irony that if anyone is sure of having received such a command from God, then he had better kill himself. And who can boast of such certainty? He lists all sorts of mental disturbances and false religiosity as excuses for putting suicidal ideas into practice, but concludes emphatically: 'What we state, what we stress, what we demonstrate in a thousand ways, is that no one should voluntarily take his own life in order to free himself from temporal sufferings, since he will fall into eternal sufferings; nor to avoid the sins of others, since then he - who was not stained by the sins of others - commits a most grave sin himself, nor on account of his own past sins, since if he is to expiate these through doing penance, he has particular need of this life in which to do that penance; nor through desire for a better life waiting for him after death, since there is no better life waiting for suicides'. (Cfr. St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* I, 26 in PL 41, 39-40.)

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

Aquinas, with Aristotle as his guide, makes Augustine's thesis more and more systematic. The fifth commandment of the Decalogue (Thou shall not kill.) is valid for everyone without exception, and that includes ourselves. Suicide is contrary to the natural law by which every one seeks his own conservation in life and resists any violent movement against the natural desire of life. It is therefore a direct attack on the love which everyone owes to him or herself. Consequently, suicide is a mortal sin. Following Aristotle, he also uses the argument of the whole and the parts. Each part as a part belongs to the whole; each person forms part of the human community and therefore, when someone commits suicide, he commits an offence against the community to which he belongs. Finally, he adds the strongest argument against suicide, which is the theological one. Human life, he argues, is a gift given to man by God and absolutely dependent on the one who, according to Deuteronomy 32:39, alone can deal in life and death. Therefore, anyone who deliberately takes his own life sins against God himself. The conscious and willed suicide, in destroying his own life, usurps God's power of judgment in a cause which is outside his (the suicide's) competence. (*Summa Theologiae* 2a-2ae, q. 64 a. 5.)

Man can dispose freely of his person in many things; but he can never morally decide his final transition from this life to another, happier one. Such a decision goes beyond the limits of human freedom and has to remain dependent on the will of God. As St. Augustine said, we have to *wait*, respecting the course of nature, for the happy future life that God has promised to those who are faithful to him. It is never permissible for man to anticipate it by taking his own life.

Aquinas equally rejects sentimental motives like taking one's life in order to free oneself from the sorrows of this life on earth. Death, he says, is the last and greatest evil that man can suffer. So committing suicide is equivalent to choosing the worst evil of all. Nor does it make sense to take one's life to make up for some crime committed, and still less through fear of committing some serious crime in the future. Those who have sinned should do penance. If they take their life, all they achieve is to add another even more serious sin and remove the very possibility of penitence and conversion. Fear of future sins is very weak argument. First, because, as St. Paul says (Rom. 3:5), one may not do evil that good may come of it; the bad means cannot lead to good ends. Now suicide is a great and certain evil; future sins, on the other hand, will always be lesser and uncertain evils. Furthermore, God is powerful and merciful in helping us not to fall into temptation and in forgiving us if we do fall.

On the suicides related in the Bible and the cases of persecuted Christians who took their lives in order to save their honour, St. Thomas adopts the same reserved and unenthusiastic stand as St. Augustine. The metaphysical possibility that some may have acted under divine inspiration cannot be discounted, but such a possibility in no way invalidates the arguments advanced against suicide in general.

Finally, St. Thomas denies that suicide can ever be an act of real courage. Not even those cases described with some narrative enthusiasm in the Bible. He states that, on the contrary, every suicide supposes weakening of human will power, which flinches at and gives way to the difficulties of life. (Cfr. *Summa Theologiae*, ad 2um, ad 3um, ad 4um et ad 5um.)

In brief, first, Aquinas argues - drawing on Aristotle - that it is in the nature of every living being to wish to preserve itself. To take one's own life is therefore not only a violation of God's commandment, but an act contrary to the natural law. Second, Aquinas emphasizes that suicide is an act of injustice against the political community. Here again he draws upon Aristotle understood political life as natural to human and essential to one's well-being. No one is entitled to make rules for oneself in disregard of the laws of the community as if one were the solitary citizen and sole ruler of one's own polls. Third, Aquinas condemns suicide as an arrogation of the power over life and death that rightly belongs to God alone. Human's sovereignty over oneself, evidenced by one's free will, does not extend to the manner of one's passing from this world to the next.

Check Your Progress III

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer

b) Check your answers with those provided at the end of the unit

1. What are the arguments of Aquinas against suicide?

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John Donne (1572-1631)

Biathanatos is the first work in English to break with the previously settled disposition on suicide established by Augustine and Aquinas. The form of Donne's argument roughly parallels that of the *Summa Theologiae*: the first part is entitled "Of Law and Nature," the second, "Of the Law of Reason" and the third, "Of the Law of God".

To the argument that all living things naturally incline to their own preservation, Donne replies that some men seem, equally naturally, to yearn for death. Donne concedes that while the desire for death, like many other human desires, can be corrupted by selfish or base motives, it should not for that reason be condemned out of hand. Deciding whether suicide is properly natural to human, Donne says, requires us to understand the intentions that direct some to take their own lives.

In the second part of his argument, Donne critiques the notion that suicide is an offense against the political community. The prohibition of suicide by civil law, he argues, says little about its status as immoral act. The law, after all, condemns many things that are immoral. True, an epidemic of suicide would clearly injure the social order, but the universal prohibition favored by moralists ignores those exceptional cases where the chief effect of the law is to condemn some to

extended suffering. Here, as in the first part of his argument, Donne insists that a proper assessment of suicide must include an analysis the actor's intent; a hypothetical effect on society is insufficient reason to proscribe the act as always and everywhere immoral.

In its concluding section, *Biathanatos* takes issue with traditional scriptural exegesis holding that suicide contravenes the law of God. Donne acknowledges the weight of the doctrinal tradition but is struck by the fact that Scripture nowhere *explicitly* condemns suicide. Moreover, the suicides recounted in the Bible are too various to be explained by Augustine's effort to condemn as morally illicit all those not specifically authorized by God. Once again, he argues that the only way to determine the morality of suicide is to assess the actor's motive; and as Scripture is notably silent on this point, Donne concludes that we are at liberty to say that not all suicides are necessarily contrary to God's will. One must distinguish between suicide in general and suicide directed toward the glory of God (as with martyrdom, for example), or suicide that is motivated by the welfare of others in accordance with Christian charity. In the end, God is the only fitting judge of the morality of such behavior, because he and he alone know the hearts of those who die by their own hand. Donne gives no general license to suicide.

David Hume (1711-1776)

David Hume's path leads to an essentially utilitarian concept of ethics. Hume's philosophical skepticism and his defense of individual autonomy in moral decision-making create the crucible in which his essay on suicide is formed. In general, it may be said that he brings the argument back to a position first fully articulated by the Stoics: when persistent grave misfortune, particularly in matters of health, robs one of the enjoyment of life, death by one's own hand can be a reasonable and welcome alternative. He thinks it necessary to address the effects of those arguments upon the minds of others. He does this in part by recasting the Thomistic arguments - though he does not refer to Aquinas by name. The core argument Hume chooses to address is that suicide encroaches upon 'the office of divine providence,' thereby 'disturbing the order of the universe.' He reduces this claim to the idea that all life belongs to God in the same manner that one may be said to own a piece of property. He suggests that perhaps suicide offends not only against God's ownership of our lives but also against the natural order of the universe he created.

Finally, Hume argues that not all suicides arise from prideful rebellion against God. Many are the consequence of abject misery that can no longer be endured. Surely the desire to eliminate pain and suffering cannot be evil in and of itself, especially if the suicide acknowledges his gratitude to God for such good as befell him before his misfortune.

Immanuel Kant (1729-1804)

Kant uses suicide to illustrate broader philosophical argument and the proper application of the categorical imperative. He hypothesizes a man whose various misfortunes bring him to the brink of despair. Despite his condition, the man remains able and willing to make rational moral decisions. May he take his own life if he concludes that continuing to live will cause him more pain than pleasure? Kant answers that the animating maxim for such an argument proceeds from self-love. But self-love, he argues, is unable to justify suicide, because self-love necessarily

presupposes the actor's continued existence. By ending his existence, the actor would contradict the basis for the maxim on which he proposed to act. Self-love cannot justify eliminating the conditions without which self-love could not exist. The maxim on which the would-be suicide proposes to act could not be made universal without destroying the very ground on which the possibility of morality rests.

Suicide is immoral because it attacks the moral order itself. Suicide makes self-love the end of action, and the moral agent's life becomes a means to this end in abandonment of its proper ends. To destroy the subject of morality in one's own person is to root out the existence of morality itself from the world, so far as this is in one's power; and yet morality is an end in itself.

Kant's opposition to suicide in a sense brings us full circle. In it we hear echoes of the Platonic and Judeo-Christian arguments that our lives are not ours to dispose of as we will, and that although man is free to choose how to lead his life, and although he is capable of ending it, he is nevertheless obliged to do his duty. The ground of Kant's argument is radically different from that of his ancient predecessors, but his conclusion is strikingly similar. God is our owner. We are his property. Suicide violates an obligation to God.

1.4. RELIGIOUS VIEWS

From the religious point of view suicide was regarded always as a crime, a violation of the social order. We shall discuss suicide according to the religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity.

Hinduism

Hinduism stands firmly on the position reached in the *Dharmasutras*, which permits religious suicide, while censuring ordinary forms of suicide or self-murder. There are in the Brahmanas two doctrines which undoubtedly pave the way for the approval of suicide from religious motives. In the first place, there is developed the conception that the proper sacrifice is that of man's self; and that other forms of offering are substitutes. In the second place, in the latest of the great Brahmanas, the *Satapatha*, the closing act of both the human and the universal sacrifices, is the giving away, by the performer, of the whole of his possessions, including in the latter case even the land, and his wandering into the forest, doubtless as a preliminary to an early death.

Buddhism

Buddhism condemns suicide unmistakable terms, it does not prohibit all self-killing. A man must live his allotted span on life. He cannot avoid by suicide, the sufferings which are the result of his former evil deeds; nor can he win sooner, by voluntary death, the reward of his good deeds. Everything comes to him who waits. We are confronted with a number of stories which prove beyond dispute that self-killing may in certain cases be the cause or the occasion of the attainment of sainthood, although in other cases it may be premature and sinful. Mahayana praises certain self-killings as self-surrender and worship. Abandoning one's existence is to be looked upon as the best self-sacrifice, for to give one's body is better than to give alms; and also

as the best worship, for to burn one's body as an offering is certainly more meritorious than to kindle lamps at a shrine. In accordance with the principles of the new Buddhism, self-surrender culminating in voluntary death has been held in honour in various Buddhist countries.

Jainism

Jainism frankly recognizes and commends religious suicide. But suicide is not permitted for all; it is allowed to those ascetics who have acquired the highest degree of perfection, and in essence it consists in giving up begging and lying down in a place to await death by hunger and thirst. The popularity of the practice is attested throughout the whole history of Jainism. Suicide, however, is still not permitted, to others than ascetics, and non-religious suicide is regarded with special horror by the Jains, as they disapprove of all taking of life.

Islam

At the present time, and for many centuries past, there has been unanimity of opinion throughout Islam that suicide is a violation of a divine command contained in the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet.

Christianity

The Church's moral teaching and canonical discipline are basically inspired by biblical revelation, which holds all life without exception to be a gift from God the creator and an object of special predilection by Christ as redeemer. Man, therefore, is not the ultimate guardian of his life. He is only a faithful and watchful custodian of it, and has to give an account of his custodianship to God. The society into which Christianity burst, however, was one in which suicide was idealised and even counselled as a heroic act of human virtue. It saw man as tied basically not to God, but to the State, while at the same time proclaiming his absolute autonomy by recommending suicide, either as a lesser evil when faced with the demands of the State and the hardships of life, or simply as a proud affirmation of human self-sufficiency. This was the mentality of many important Greek and Roman philosophers and sages at the time when Christianity made its appearance on the historical scene.

Christian moral thinking on suicide reached its culmination in the teaching of St Augustine. His thought was later codified and enriched in the thirteenth century by St Thomas Aquinas, who has become the central and indispensable reference point for all Catholic moral theologians down to our own day. The first Christian moralists were primarily concerned with refuting the Stoic and Epicurean views that favoured suicide. St Augustine was forced to consider the matter by a group of terrorist commandos, who sometimes took their own lives as an extremist form of provocation to violence. In St Thomas' day, suicide was again current among Albigensja and Cathars. In the nineteenth century, romanticism in its poetical, philosophical and sociological manifestations again idealized suicide, and in our own times it is once more becoming alarmingly prevalent with the growth of materialism of the present-day culture.

1.5. LET US SUM UP

As regards the attitude of the philosophic schools, the teaching of the Pythagoreans condemns suicide. According to Orphic or Pythagorean doctrine, the soul is undergoing in the body a penitential discipline for ante-natal sin. Hence suicide is an unwarranted rebellion against the will of God on the part of the individual, whom it behoves to wait until it please God to set him free. Plato, if we may infer his position from the *Phaedo* and the *Laws*, condemns suicide on grounds which we could characterize as religious. Religious, too, are the grounds on which Aristotle appears to regard suicide as reprehensible. Aristotle treats suicide as an offence not against the individual, but against the State, and that of a religious kind, as involving the city in pollution and requiring therefore penalties of a religious nature. Stoic teaching was decidedly favourable to suicide. Life and death being for the wise man indifferent, morally neither good nor evil, the question of suicide resolves itself for him into a decision whether life or death is in a given case preferable. Life in accordance with nature being the Stoic ideal, when the conditions essential to that ideal are no longer fulfilled suicide becomes a reasonable deliverance. The most powerful influence on Western thought about suicide originates in Jewish Scriptures' account of the creation of human in God's image.

1.6. KEY WORDS

Decalogue: Ethical Decalogue, or Ten Commandments, a list of religious and moral imperatives told to be written by God and given to Moses on Mount Sinai in the form of two stone tablets, as found in Exodus 34.

Myth: A myth is usually a sacred narrative explaining how the world and humankind came to be in their present form. Many scholars in other fields use the term "myth" in somewhat different ways. In a very broad sense, the word can refer to any traditional story.

1.7. FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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1.8. ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

1. Suicide is intentionally bringing about one's death by passive or active means. A person who commits suicide is a person who acts on the desire to die.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

1. The soul is immortal. Life is not ours to do with as we will. It is given by God. We cannot run away from the reality of life and kill ourselves.

2. Human is a social and political being. Each individual has a duty towards the community/society. Suicide is a grave offence against the good order of the society and the wishes of gods.

Answers to Check Your Progress III

1. Judaism does not justify self-interested suicide. The Catholic Church is firm, uncompromising and absolute in rejecting suicide. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) condemns suicide. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is as uncompromising of suicide as was Augustine. In fact, Aquinas borrows from Augustine (as well as from Aristotle). He exhibits threefold moral criticism of suicide: he claims that one who commits suicide fails in one's duty (a) to oneself, (b) to one's community, and (c) to God. A failure in one's duty to oneself: Suicide is wrong, according to Aquinas's initial argument, because it is a breach of charity. Charity is a duty we have toward ourselves because to act otherwise is contrary to the inclination of nature whereby we naturally love ourselves and seek to preserve ourselves in existence. A failure in one's duty to one's community: Aquinas' second argument against suicide is one that he borrows from Aristotle: to commit suicide is to rob the community of one of its community members. A failure in one's duty to one's God: Aquinas' second argument against suicide is that suicide is a violation of the sovereignty of God and therefore a failure in our duty to our Creator. His reasoning is that I belong to God because I have been created by Him, life is God's gift to me, and thus for me to kill myself is to make a decision that is only God's to make.

Inpatient unit staff need to be vigilant, particularly when the person is not well-known and for the first week after admission. Treatment (both psychopharmacological and psychological) of underlying mental illnesses should be initiated as early as possible. C D. Suicide occurs at a significantly higher rate in those admitted, or recently admitted, to psychiatric wards than among the general population. Kamikaze, officially Kamikaze/Ship Tokubetsu Kaitai, were a part of the Japanese Special Attack Units of military aviators who flew suicide attacks for the Empire of Japan against Allied naval vessels in the closing stages of the Pacific campaign of World War II, intending to destroy warships more effectively than with conventional air attacks. About 3,800 kamikaze pilots died during the war, and more than 7,000 naval personnel were killed by kamikaze attacks. Presentation on theme: "Personal Development and Health Unit 1: Emotional Wellness DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE: A LETHAL COMBINATION." Presentation transcript: 1 Personal Development and Health Unit 1: Emotional Wellness DEPRESSION AND SUICIDE: A LETHAL COMBINATION. 1 Unit Suicide Research and Mental Health Promotion, Department of Social and For general reporting of suicide, the rate ratio was 1.002 (0.997 to 1.008; five studies; median follow-up 1 day, range. 1-8 days) for a one article increase in the number of reports on suicide. Heterogeneity was large and partially explained by celebrity and methodological factors. Enhanced funnel plots suggested some publication bias in the literature.