

Suicide attempts as turning points

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Abstract

Purpose – *The purpose of this study is to examine why an attempt at suicide does not always indicate the beginning of a life with poor mental health.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Case studies, supplemented by follow-up studies of attempted suicides.*

Findings – *One of the strongest predictors of a healthy life after the suicide attempt was found to be improvement in the appropriateness of behavior toward others and improved adult functioning.*

Originality/value – *The results suggest that behavioral coaching, in addition to traditional psychiatric treatment, could help attempted suicides move on with their lives productively.*

Keywords *Follow-up, Attempted suicide, Behavioral coaching*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

In one week in December 2022, two weekly magazines had stories of suicide attempters who went on to live productive lives.

At the age of 16 years, John Furniss tried to kill himself with a shotgun aimed at his face (Hyman, 2022). He survived, but the suicide attempt left him blind. Twenty-five years later, John is a TikTok sensation with 1.8 million followers who watch his videos of his woodworking, making bowls, jewelry trays and honey pots, and his talks on mental health issues. He is married, and his wife paints his woodworks which they sell online.

The path was not easy after his suicide attempt. He used methamphetamines and was arrested for dealing drugs. He also had a near-fatal sinus infection. His family supported him through a drug rehabilitation program and, in a vocational training program, he met a blind teacher who did woodworking.

Alice Neel (1900–1984) was an American painter, whose work initially was ignored but who was finally recognized in the 1960s and 1970s while she was alive and, at a retrospective show of her works in 2010, she was called “one of the greatest portrait artists of the 20th century.” Born in Philadelphia, she lived in New York City during the Great Depression. She experienced poverty, painful romantic affairs and the loss of her children (two died and one was taken from her). On one occasion, a boyfriend slashed and burned many of her paintings. The New Deal helped her to live with a stipend, and she eventually found a man who supported her work (and wanted to marry her).

In 1930, after her husband left her and took their daughter to Cuba, Neel was hospitalized with a psychiatric breakdown and, on her release, she attempted suicide and was hospitalized again in Philadelphia General Hospital. She was released in 1931 to her parents' home, and then she returned to New York where she was able to continue her creative work.

Celebrities who attempted suicide

It is useful to study celebrities who have died by suicide or who have attempted suicide because there is often a wealth of data about their lives. There are many reports of

celebrities who have attempted suicide, but it is difficult to document them accurately, especially many of those who have supposedly attempted suicide found in a Google search. Some people are, of course, afraid of the stigma attached to attempting suicide and deny what may have been an actual suicide attempt. However, some celebrities have admitted attempting suicide or their attempts have been documented.

Although it is not considered to be an acceptable scholarly source, the following attempted suicides come from Wikipedia which the reader, therefore, can check. The following continued their careers successfully after their suicidal behavior:

- Drew Barrymore (1975–) was treated for a psychiatric disorder in her childhood and attempted suicide at the age of 14 years.
- Drew Carey (1958–) has admitted to two suicide attempts using sleeping pills.
- Eminem (1972–) attempted suicide in 1997 at a time of substance abuse and personal distress resulting from his lack of success as a rap singer and being fired from restaurant jobs.
- Marianne Faithful (1946–) attempted suicide after ending her affair with Mick Jagger and losing custody of her son.
- Ken Griffey Jr. (1969–) attempted suicide in 1988 by ingesting 277 aspirin pills, citing depression and anger at his father (Ken Griffey Sr). He had been drafted by the Seattle Mariners and was playing in the minor leagues at the time. He was called up to the majors in 1989.
- Vanilla Ice (1967–) attempted suicide with a heroin overdose in 1994.
- Paris Jackson (1998–) attempted suicide several times as a teenager while abusing drugs but denied reports of attempting suicide in 2019.
- Billy Joel (1949–) attempted suicide in 1970 by drinking furniture polish. He was depressed, and his singing career seemed to be in decline. (His early albums were not successful.)
- Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) attempted suicide in his childhood by jumping from a second-story window when he thought he had caused his grandmother's death (after he caused his brother to fall from a banister into her).
- Ozzy Osborne (1948–) claims to have attempted suicide several times as a teenager.
- Owen Wilson (1968–) was reported as attempting suicide in 2007 while depressed.
- Oprah Winfrey (1954–) was severely depressed and wrote a suicide note but says that she did not make a suicide attempt.

Some of these suicide attempts were made during adolescence, and most of those listed above received psychiatric treatment as well as support from friends and family. The critical question is, given that an individual has attempted suicide early in life, what distinguishes those who go on to or continue a successful and productive life and those for whom the suicide attempt is the beginning of a long path of pain and suffering?

Follow-up studies of attempted suicides

It is difficult to conduct long-term follow-ups of suicidal adolescents and adults. Long-term follow-up studies require adequate funding and involvement by researchers who often must depend on short-term scholarly publications for tenure and promotion.

In the few follow-up studies that have appeared, it has proven to be very difficult to differentiate between those who attempt suicide and subsequently attempt suicide (or die

by suicide) from those who move on from their suicide attempt and remain nonsuicidal. For example, [Levi-Belz et al. \(2018\)](#) studied 117 adolescents who had attempted suicide and followed them up for an average of 145 weeks. They found that none of the variables (including mental health scores) measured at intake for the first suicide attempt predict who would repeat, except that the reattempters had higher high school drop-out rates and lower levels of education.

In one of the few long-term follow-up studies of adolescent suicide attempters, [Goldston et al. \(2016\)](#) followed 180 adolescent suicide attempters aged 12–18 years for an average of 13.6 years. They identified four trajectories:

- an increasing risk class (11%);
- a highest overall risk class (12%);
- a decreasing risk class (33%); and
- a low-risk class (44%).

Thus, the majority of the adolescents stayed at low risk of suicidal behavior or their risk declined over time.

What characterized these first two groups whose suicide risk did not abate? The groups did not differ in sex or ethnicity, nor in social support, whether they had become parents, dropping out of school or incarceration. They had more social adjustment difficulties and functional impairment in their role performance as adults. They also showed greater impairment in appropriateness of behavior toward others.

Both groups had high levels of trait anxiety and were impulsive as adults. The group with increasing suicide risk showed aggressive and impulsive behavior as adults. The group with the highest overall suicide risk was more often diagnosed with a major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder and phobic disorder. They had more often experienced sexual abuse, had higher scores for hopelessness and lower scores for reason for living.

Discussion

It is clear that a suicide attempt does not necessarily impair the person's life trajectory. The results from [Goldston et al.](#)'s study suggest that, in addition to appropriate psychiatric treatment, coaching in life skills may be crucial. If a person is impaired in their role as an adult and if they behave inappropriately toward others, then they will experience more interpersonal stress and more rejection by those that they interact with (friends, neighbors, coworkers, etc.).

Serendipity also plays a role. The life of John Furniss, discussed above, did not turn around at first. It was serendipitous that he eventually met a blind man who did woodworking and who provided a model for John as to how he might reshape his life. Alice Neel, also discussed above, went home to her family who provided support until Alice could resume her life and career. She was also fortunate in finding a man who supported her (in contrast to her husband).

For the celebrities who attempted suicide and then moved on with their lives, understanding what helped them to move on must await detailed biographies of these individuals that include the resources that were available for them and the events that occurred after their suicide attempts that aided their recovery. Wikipedia accounts do not provide this information.

We can, however, conclude that, for some individuals, a suicide attempt is not the beginning of a self-destructive path for the rest of their lives, but rather a turning point that leads to a productive and satisfying life thereafter.

References

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Further reading

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