

The stigma of suicide within us

Social stigma and prejudice are our enemies. Every human being is taught from childhood that suicidal people are shameful, sinful, weak, selfish, manipulative--taught that we are contagious, that we want to harm others.

None of these ideas are true. No scientific study has ever confirmed that a significant proportion of suicidal people have these qualities. But children believe what they are taught. Each person we seek help from has been conditioned to respond with fear, contempt, and aversion. Worse yet, when we became suicidal, we applied these ideas to ourselves. Much of the content of depressive rumination -- Im no good, Im stupid, Im a failure, Im weak, I dont have enough will power, - is simply the reflexive response of internalized stigma. Stigma causes us to inflict pain upon ourselves and deters us from seeking help. It causes those around us to shun us, to be afraid to talk with us, to abuse us.

While thousands of years of social oppression are an enemy, our allies include millions of years of biological programming. We are born with the desire to stay alive. It is the most basic thing about us; we share it with all living beings. At each moment, millions of events take place inside our bodies and inside our minds that are designed to help us stay alive. Until the present, at least, the forces that are life-preserving have been stronger than the forces that are life-destroying. Many of us endured bleak periods during which inner voices cried out, Kill yourself. Your life is nothing but pain and misery. You might as well end it all. Yet we did not die. The desire for life is pre-conscious, pre-verbal. It keeps us going even when the voices tell us to die.

We must be, at bottom, fundamentally healthy or we would not have stayed alive this long. Like all living creatures, we can heal from our injuries and our suffering. If we have a healthy environment, healthy behaviors, healthy relationships, we will recover. We need to identify our histories of trauma, abuse, neglect, grief, and loss. We need to overcome denial on all of our addictive behaviors. We need to provide ourselves with good health care. We need a safe place where we can be who we are, and be welcome. We need quiet, respectful attention as we tell our stories in as much detail and as many times as we need to.

If we get these things we will not just stay alive, but we will have good lives. Lives that are free of the curse of depression and suicidal ideation, lives that are productive and creative, lives that are filled with friendship and love.

By David L. Conroy, PhD.