

**CONFRONTING
SUICIDE:
Helping Teens
at Risk**

By
Donovan Thomas
(D.Min)
Kingston: Youth House
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**Reviewed
By
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Dr. Donovan Thomas, the National Director of Jamaica Youth for Christ (YFC) and recently appointed as the Regional Director of YFC International in the Caribbean, has made an important contribution to the literature on suicide with his book *Confronting Suicide*. A comment by Consultant Psychiatrist Dr. Janet La Grenade of the UWI Hospital (one of several endorsing the publication), endorses this perception as she states:

This book provides helpful information gathered with scientific rigor, as well as practical approaches, and tips for being effective. Academics seeking information should find it a useful source of knowledge, perhaps touching off further lines of enquiry. (back cover)

The Rev. Dr. Gerry Gallimore, a former YFC International Director, in his Foreword makes the following comment:

His book alerts us to the signs of depression, provides us with the tools to treat the pervasive malady, and points us to the power of the Gospel to provide hope, and to turn desperate lives around.

In my opinion this is a 'must read' for parents, guardians, pastors, educators, counselors, teachers – anyone with children, or concerned for a depressed

friend, colleague or youngster. (ix)

The book is wide ranging in its scope both in terms of the research that has been conducted as well as in the critical analysis of the problems and the approach to solutions. The author is generous in his acknowledgement of the many persons and organisations who have contributed to this fine little book. As such the credibility of the findings and the legitimacy of the approach to the problem of suicide among teenagers in Jamaica cannot be questioned. In fact one of the chapters -- Intervention and Prevention -- is written by the well-known medical professional Dr. Angela Ramlal-Willimas.

Dr. Thomas makes the point in the introduction that the book has three objectives:

- To share basic information concerning suicide tendencies - - and the alarming increase-- in Jamaica
- To inspire corrective action among people who are concerned with the welfare of teenagers
- To trigger a process of transformation for teenagers to find an alternative reality

The book of some 170 pages has eight chapters which are clearly written and well referenced. In addition to the tributes mentioned earlier there are several others from Christian leaders and medical professional who endorse its publication with high praise. Comments from each of the chapters will give an insight into the overall thrust of the book

Chapter 1, Explaining Suicide, gives an international perspective to suicide as a feature of human experience and gives some very important general features of suicide. In statistical terms in Jamaica over the six-year period 1996-2001 the ratio of male to female in Jamaica was 7:1 (313 male, 87% and 45 female, 13%). The statistics also point to a worrying and increasing trend in suicides. Comparing the decades of the 80's and 90's: between

1982-1991 there were 100 suicides while in the period 1992-2001 there were 446.

The chapter lists some important causes of suicidal thinking in Jamaican teenagers. Among these are:

Death and loss; guilt and hostility; broken love affair; molestations at home; unplanned pregnancy; revenge; social isolation; manipulation; impulse or whim; escape; reunion with loved ones; physical illness; expression of love. It also lists a number of warning signs or signals of suicidal tendencies. These are useful signs for the interested counselor or family member to look for. Among these are:

A plan; previous suicide attempts; a threat; mental illness; preparations for death negative emotions; stress; loneliness and social isolation; economic stress; negative effects of success.

Chapter 2, Statistical Analysis. The study comprised 190 students drawn from eight secondary schools within the Kingston and St. Andrew area. The male/female mix was about equal with the age groups 13-14; 15-16 and 17-19 being about one third each. A questionnaire with 50 items was administered and then analysed.

Chapter 3, Three Important Questions. The author in seeking to give an understanding of suicidal tendencies, relates the question to three systems that interact on a teenager's experience. These are:

- The family system. In discussing the various types of family system – single parent, blended and nuclear, the author makes the point that the atmosphere that is created in the home is a critical factor in the youngster's self esteem and possible contribution to suicidal tendencies.
- The educational system is described as being emotionally insensitive to children's needs and aspirations. The system is geared to failure rather than success and can contribute to a child's self esteem and self worth.

- The economic system is another factor in influencing suicidal tendencies. The physiological stresses which accompany economic hardship have the potential to trigger suicide.

Chapter 4, Theological and Biblical Perspectives, is the longest chapter in the book and tackles a number of the difficult theological questions associated with suicide. To begin with the author uses the definition of Professor James T. Clemons: “Suicide is the choice and the successful completion of the act to end one’s life regardless of motive, circumstances or method” (94). Many of the questions one would expect to be considered such as: suicide and faith, suicide and hope and going to heaven are discussed, and not necessarily with finality or dogmatically, but leaving the reader with much to reflect on.

Chapter 5, Become Involved looks at the various systems that interact with the teenager and how each of these systems can become involved in proactive and practical ways in helping teenagers as they struggle with their inward hopes and fears. The ‘systems’ that need to be much more involved in the light of the significant increase in suicides are:

- The church through building support groups, providing economic support, giving motivational talks and information seminars and providing prayer support.
- The home, through spending quality time with the children, securing drugs and weapons and developing positive attitudes
- The school through its counseling network and increasing teacher sensitivity
- The wider community through public education, media support and community action.

The chapter also addresses some useful guidelines to the individual faced with a potential suicider:

Sangster: *Confronting Suicide* by Donovan Thomas - Review

Be a good listener, practice healthy conflict resolution, take a genuine interest in the individual, learning the difference between correction and punishment and dispelling society taboos regarding seeking help.

All in all, the chapter is full of helpful advice with good pointers on the way to deal with the problem.

Chapter 6, Myths About Suicide. The chapter lists some twenty commonly held myths about suicide. Among them are:

A person who at any time is suicidal is suicidal forever; a person who talks about suicide is only seeking attention; persons who become suicidal are only of a certain type and many more. The author carefully answers each of these.

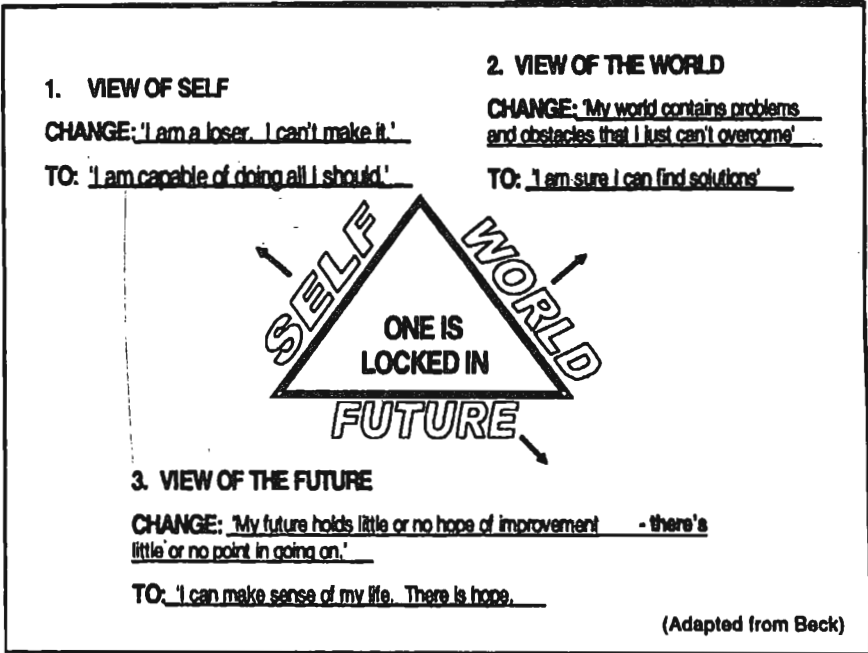
Chapter 7, Intervention and Prevention, mentioned earlier as a guest chapter, brings a number of important questions into focus in the intervention process. Perhaps the most important facet of the discussion is the need to change the individual's worldview. The teenager is challenged to change his or her Worldview which embraces views of Self, The World and The Future. (See Figure). Fundamental changes in these three areas can mean a new outlook on life and can rescue that individual from the potential of life threatening suicide.

Chapter 8, Stories of Hope, the final chapter, deals with three cases of rescue. They are all girls, but tell in a meaningful way just how the change in attitude can be achieved. It would have been helpful to have had at least one story of a boy since the boys are in the majority.

Confronting Suicide is a well researched volume and should be in every school library and pastors study. The Ministry of Education and similar bodies throughout the region could very well use this volume as a required text for its guidance counselor's programme.

Figure 7.1

Changing One's Worldview



(153)

