



INSIDE THE SUICIDAL MIND

BY JOANIE REILLY

Counsellor Joanie Reilly describes an encounter with someone who is contemplating taking their own life. Out of respect for confidentiality, Joanie has created a fictional character (John) to represent the many hundreds of conversations she has had and to help us understand a little more.

"Tell me about your suicide thoughts." Sitting in the chair opposite me, John was calm. He was too calm. He began to talk. John had attempted suicide. I asked him if he had another plan and he told me yes. I felt myself swallowing hard. I could feel familiar feelings of anxiety and panic. It is normal to feel this way in a death-threatening conversation.

After five years, I have learned not to react. Acting out of our own fearfulness around suicide can make us want to avoid it. Imagine how *much more* fearful the suicidal person is. John and I continue our conversation. It is matter of fact, even bizarrely humorous, in much the same way we might discuss what we had for lunch.

Not everyone who has suicidal thoughts is high risk. The thoughts become important only when they persist and someone starts to make plans. John is at this point. How did he become like this? John was outwardly together - a successful business and family man, well-liked and respected. But underneath he had a deeply painful story that he had never been able to talk about. He was full of pain and grief. He coped by numbing his feelings and burying himself in work. No one ever suspected.

His suicide attempt was not an impulse but a slow-growing, carefully hidden and calculated plan. Suicide for John had become the perfectly rational solution to his deep pain.

Suicide is not a rational act. It is an irrational way of escape from what has become overwhelming. John's inner world was full of anguish and extreme loneliness, a toxic mix of unrealistic shame, guilt, anxiety and self-hatred.

Fuelling all those feelings were a whole collection of irrational thoughts. *'It's all my fault', 'I'm worthless',*

'It will never change'... John believed no one would understand, and his sense of shame kept him imprisoned, even though he was surrounded by a loving family.

I see the same pattern repeated, especially with men. Not knowing how to deal with negative emotions, they bottle them up, deny them, avoid them, cover them over with activity or anaesthetise them with alcohol or drugs. It works, for a while, but eventually repressed feelings will demand a voice.

For years, John managed to hold it all together but now circumstances had lifted the lid on the bottled up feelings. He felt trapped by helplessness and

hopelessness. He began to think he would be better off dead and that his family would be better off without him.

To the rational mind, this can appear

ludicrous. People ask, 'What about your family, *how can you be so selfish?*'

But it is important to understand this is not the thinking of a logical, rational mind. This is the irrational thinking of someone who is totally lost in deep emotional pain. John truly believed he was a worthless person and his family would be better off without him.

John did not want his family to suspect. His wife was so shocked when he attempted suicide. Family members often feel guilt for what has happened. They are left bewildered and often angry. Some of the saddest situations I encounter are family members who believe (wrongly) that they were somehow responsible for a death because they did not see it coming. They blame themselves. Yet a suicidal person can and

often does hide their feelings very well.

John began to change when he decided to seek help. His greatest need was for compassionate understanding. Despite our own anxiety, we need to move in and not be afraid to ask, 'Do you have suicidal thoughts?' Listening with kindness, respect and acceptance helps break into the isolation and distorted reality.

As he began to talk, light began to shine into the dark messages he had believed and he gradually saw his irrational thinking for what it was. Today, John is free from suicidal thinking. He is recognising and challenging his faulty beliefs, not burying them.

One remarkable thing that I have seen happen on many occasions, is that as John began to get unblocked emotionally, he began to open up spiritually. He also began to read the Scriptures with new eyes and to discover the Jesus who said, "I came that you might have life".



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