

SOS Détresse

Do not stay alone with suicidal thoughts (2021)

A young man is unhappily in love and in his despair, he sees no other way out than to take his own life. This is the tragic story of the young Werther, written by Goethe. After its release, the number of suicides increased, hence the so-called “Werther effect”. This Werther effect assumes that a detailed reporting of a suicide, as it was the case in Goethe’s book, could lead to more people taking their own lives. This effect has also been observed repeatedly in modern times, especially when suicide (whether real or fictitious) has been portrayed as the only possible way out and has been reported in a certain sensational manner. Contrary to this, however, recent research has identified the so-called “Papageno effect”, which states that suicides can be prevented by reporting with less sensational detail about suicide, as well as by talking more openly about suicide and especially about possible support. This effect goes back to another (fictional) young man who was unhappily in love and found himself in a suicidal crisis: Papageno from Mozart’s “magic flute”. Unlike Werther, however, Papageno did not stay alone with his suicidal thoughts but found people he could talk to about it and finally found new hope. This shows us how important it is not to be alone with suicidal thoughts and that people from the environment can and even should dare to address the subject of suicide with the person.

This is one of the most central points of today’s World Suicide Prevention Day, as one important component of suicide prevention is to talk about suicide in an open manner, without judging or forcing a person with suicidal thoughts to justify it.

The thought of not wanting to live anymore, that suicide is seen as a solution, occurs to many people at different stages of their lives. Trusting another person costs a lot of effort, especially when it comes to such an emotionally intense issue as suicide. A first important step may be to communicate suicidal thoughts or intentions to an anonymous person. That’s exactly what we at SOS Détresse are there for, whether by phone or online, where you can find an open ear and express all thoughts and feelings in confidence. The importance of this support can be seen, among other things, in the fact that in 2020 alone, suicide was an issue in 91 calls and 21 emails, so on average twice a week. This is why we encourage both those people with suicidal thoughts as well as the people around them not to stay alone with these suicidal thoughts and to talk to each other or to us about it.

Dr. Jessica Levy, psychologist at SOS Détresse

Literature recommendations and references

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