

The background of the cover features several stylized, light green leaf motifs scattered across a yellow-to-white gradient. These motifs are simple line drawings of leaves on short stems, appearing in various orientations.

SUBTLE SUICIDE

**Our Silent Epidemic of
Ambivalence about Living**

**MICHAEL A. CHURCH AND
CHARLES I. BROOKS**

 *Greenwood*
PUBLISHING GROUP

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Our Silent Epidemic
of Ambivalence about Living

MICHAEL A. CHURCH AND
CHARLES I. BROOKS

PRAEGER

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Manufactured in the United States of America

To our daughters, Dominique, Alondra, Natasha, Audra, and Kelly

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Preface

We have divided this book into two parts. In the first part, we introduce and define the concept of subtle suicide. At its simplest level, “subtle suicide” describes the dynamics of people who, though they may not overtly and genuinely try to kill themselves, nevertheless lead self-destructive lives because they honestly do not care if they live or die. Throughout our discussion, we use real case studies from our files to illustrate the variety of subtle suicide actions and some of the family dynamics that seem to reappear over many different cases. We end Part I with a chapter on how family members can identify and help the subtle suicide victim. This chapter is a practical, hands-on discussion to answer questions like, “What do I do and what do I say when I suspect someone I care for is moving down the subtle suicide road?”

Part II is written more for the college undergraduate or graduate student and for professionals who work with clients in a counseling context. Here, we provide some historical context for the notion of subtle suicide and touch a bit on theoretical distinctions between our concept and similar ones offered by previous theorists and researchers. We end the second part with a discussion of the need for a formal instrument to measure subtle suicide and distinguish it from other diagnostic conditions.

Recognition of subtle suicide behavior is hardly new in psychology, but our treatment of it is. We stress how subtle suicide is often misdiagnosed as bipolar disorder or any one of a number of other psychological disorders, or as an addiction like gambling or alcohol/drug abuse. In the case of subtle suicide, such addictions are symptoms of deeper psychological conflicts. We have found that when people suffering from subtle suicide are made aware of their condition, they no longer feel alone and isolated. Furthermore, any addictive behaviors they are showing begin to make

sense to them as symptoms of a deeper problem. By the same token, they realize that diagnoses stressing depression or anxiety as their fundamental problem are misplaced, and they understand why psychiatric medications so often fail to bring them any long-term relief. In this book, we also note that when family members and professionals reach these same understandings and insights, both the sufferer and significant others can be “on the same page” and work together to defeat this silent enemy.

We would like to thank our wives, Nelya and Joyce, for their emotional support. In addition, we thank Melanie Bradshaw, Kristy Cerullo, Jennifer Derby, Heidi Pierson, and Amilynn Savner for their contributions and help in preparation of the manuscript.

Introduction

We all know people who are living “on the edge” and, at the same time, wasting their lives. Some of these people we know quite well, and others only at a distance. One way or another, we have become aware of their risky behaviors, self-neglect, carelessness, and negative mood states. Sometimes we hear them express pessimistic and depressive thoughts and beliefs. In these persons, we observe a huge waste of human potential. Worse, even tragically, we see people who become sick more frequently than most, and who may die prematurely or suddenly as a result of their self-defeating actions.

We all have felt the helplessness associated with witnessing these types of individuals, people who seem to adopt a “who cares?” attitude about themselves and life. The distinguishing characteristic of these people is ambivalence: “I could care less if I live or die.”

This book is written for all who have experienced, directly or indirectly, these sorts of behaviors, perceptions, and feelings. It is our hope that both those who have suffered or are suffering from this kind of lifestyle and those who attempt to help them will find the concepts in this book both illuminating and helpful in dealing with this all-too-common life pattern that we call *subtle suicide*.

We write this book for four reasons. First, we want to make readers more aware of the concept of subtle suicide and how many millions of people suffer from the condition. We are confident you will find this concept relevant because you have at least one friend, relative, or acquaintance who suffers from this condition.

Second, we want to cover the causes of subtle suicide. This analysis allows us to suggest some preventive measures, as well as to discuss strategies for treating this condition earlier and more effectively.

Third, we want to review the negative impact of subtle suicide, on both sufferers and their significant others. Having knowledge of these effects can potentially motivate both the victims and those around them to avoid or minimize the detrimental and demoralizing consequences of this condition.

Finally, we want to discuss strategies to combat this devastating problem. No one is born with a desire to become a self-defeating and self-destructive person and suffer an unnecessary loss of positive life experiences. Yet, too many people in our society find themselves in this situation. We believe there are many methods available to treat such a problem. Unfortunately, both the subtle suicide condition and the methods available to treat it are too often neglected in the mental health profession. We want to correct this oversight.

Senior author Michael Church became interested in the notion of subtle suicide years ago after he heard many outpatient clients essentially saying that they were “sort of” suicidal. They did not actually use the term *subtle*, but the underlying nature of their thinking was implied by statements like:

- “Don’t worry that I’ll try and commit suicide. After all, I don’t want to be committed to the psych ward. But almost every night I feel that if I don’t wake up tomorrow, then that’s okay.”
- “I’m not going to deliberately try to kill myself, but if I stepped off a curb and a bus ran over me, that would be okay.”
- “I don’t want to hurt myself and others by committing suicide, but I plan to continue smoking heavily so I can die sooner of lung cancer or other problems.”

As Church saw these and similar ideas expressed in his group therapy sessions with psychiatric clients, he became convinced of the need for an analysis of this subtle process of self-destruction. Working with this type of client on a regular basis focused his thinking, and he continued his collaboration with Charles Brooks, his coauthor of an earlier work (*How Psychology Applies to Everyday Life*, Greenwood Press, 2009). Both of us believe a book analyzing subtle suicide is long overdue and can help lay readers, students, and professionals to think differently about people who are subtly suicidal and to understand better the dynamics of this condition.

Extensive experience in performing individual and group therapy allowed Church to see the underlying processes of subtle suicide at work in many people. The case studies of clients in therapy described in this book to illustrate different aspects of subtle suicide are from his practice. Not all of our case examples, however, involve outpatient or hospitalized clients. We also draw upon our experiences with colleagues, students, acquaintances, and relatives. We found it relatively easy to identify many people who fit the profile. That is why we believe subtle suicide is a

condition of epidemic proportions. Unfortunately, because the condition is often misdiagnosed, we also see it as a *silent* epidemic. We are quite sure, however, that after reading this book, you will also be able to identify many people who are suffering from this dangerous condition and become aware of steps you can take to help them.

We have taken considerable care to protect the identities of persons discussed in this book. We often change gender, age, status, ethnicity, or other aspects of the case, without modifying its underlying dynamics. In fact, we can say confidently that if you are one of Michael Church's clients or have contact with either of us at any level (student, friend, relative, etc.) and think you recognize yourself in this book, you are probably wrong.

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_____ *Part I* _____

The Basics of Subtle Suicide

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_____ Chapter 1 _____

Defining Subtle Suicide

JACK

Let's begin our journey into the world of subtle suicide with the case of Jack, a man who, from childhood into adulthood, consistently avoided negative emotions and responsibility for his actions. The older of two children, Jack came from a working-class family. He was always a physically large, overweight boy, and the other kids typically made fun of him. Consequently, he never developed much self-confidence and had pretty low self-esteem.

Jack's family never had a lot of money. His home life during his childhood cannot be described as overflowing with warmth and love. In fact, the primary source of acceptance, praise, and "love" in Jack's family seemed to be food. There was always lots to eat, and the parents rewarded their kids for "eating well," which really meant overeating. Whenever the kids came home from school, Mom was in the kitchen cooking, ready to welcome them with all sorts of treats. Jack's father, on the other hand, was a domineering, cold, and harsh parent. In fact, other kids and their parents who knew him called him "Khrushchev," after the prime minister of the Soviet Union when Jack was a young boy. We do not know if Jack's father physically abused him; when his wife asked him about this possibility, Jack refused to give a direct answer.

In high school and college, Jack was not overly popular, but he did have a small group of peers to hang out with. For the most part, these were quiet years, as Jack got acceptable grades and stayed below the radar, so to speak. He plugged along, avoiding challenge and confrontation. He quietly did his work and kept out of trouble.

After graduation from college, Jack got a job, met a girl, got married, and began a family. Unfortunately, he continued to avoid facing the