

Preventing Suicide

The Solution Focused Approach

John Henden



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To all my clients over the past 33 years, from whom I have learnt so much about how to be helpful and useful to people in distress.

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About the Author

John Henden is an internationally known and well-respected workshop presenter and trainer, who has a special interest in various challenging applications of the solution focused approach to psychological problems. The subject of suicide is one such interest.

John, having gained a first degree in psychology, worked in UK mental hospitals, along with many hundreds of other psychology graduates in the 1970s, to bring about positive change. During his NHS career, he had two papers published on the changing language of mental health and presented an early paper on this subject at a mental health promotion conference.

After 22 years in the UK National Health Service as both a practitioner and a manager, John set up a training, counselling and consultancy partnership providing a wide range of products and services to both public and private sectors.

John Henden is a counsellor and psychotherapist and over time has specialised in couples work, drug and alcohol dependency, and working with abuse and trauma.

It is his specialised approach to suicide prevention which has gained most public attention over the last few years. He has presented workshops at conferences; run training courses in several countries; and has had numerous suicidal clients on which to field-test the radical tools and techniques he outlines. Suicide rates within mental health services have been reduced significantly in areas where this new approach has been applied.

John has a personal interest in the subject, as he had strong suicidal thoughts as a child; lost a cousin to suicide; and witnessed an exceptionally high number of suicides within formal mental health services.

As a trainer and workshop presenter, John Henden has an energising and inspirational teaching style which incorporates a high level of humour, despite the seriousness of the subject.

As a solution focused practitioner, John never ceases to be amazed at how its effective and well-structured approach lends itself to the widest possible range of difficulties with which practitioners are presented.

John Henden is among one of the leading innovators within his field, having developed some interesting ideas and techniques of his own: 'leapfrogging' the problem; 'the five o'clock rule'; 'the solution focused feelings tank'; and, 'beating the "if only ..." monster'.

Having had various articles and papers published over his long career, he has at last been persuaded to get all his ideas on suicide prevention out in book form.

Foreword

This book reminds me of a story that touched me deeply. It was told by Heather Fiske, a wise and soulful family therapist. Heather heard this story (Fiske, 2008) from a young Canadian aboriginal man in the context of his speaking about suicide deaths in his community and family, and describing his personal struggle to find reasons to carry on.

In the story, a young man is confiding to his grandfather about feelings of despair. He tells Grandfather that he has next to nothing in his life – no job, no marketable skills for getting a job, and that he has been recently rejected by the girl he loves. He tells Grandfather that half of the young people with whom he grew up are now already dead by suicide and that most of the rest are feeling hopeless like he is, and it is hard for them to find reasons to go on. Instead they sit around and get stoned or drunk. Many nights he has joined them. Why should he not?

His grandfather listens thoughtfully for a long time. Finally he tells his grandson: “Your despair is a wolf. This wolf is very powerful. This wolf will kill you, and it will eat your soul. But hope is also a wolf, just as powerful, and it will fight the wolf of despair for you.” And then he stops.

Naturally the grandson wants more of an answer and so he protests: “Grandfather, please tell me—I NEED to know! Which wolf wins the fight? Which wolf survives?” And his grandfather answers: “The one that you feed.”

I am confident that reading this book will help therapists and other care givers discover further ways to help their clients nourish (feed) hope.

Yvonne Dolan, Director

The Institute for Solution-focused Therapy, Highland, IN. U.S.A.

Fiske, Heather (2008). *Hope in Action: Solution-focused Conversations About Suicide*. Philadelphia, PA: The Haworth Press/ Taylor-Francis Group.

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