**SUICIDE IN THE MARSHALLS**

**Presentation at the National Suicide Prevention Training Workshop**

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Introduction

My personal interest in the problem began when a friend of mine, Dale Miyagi, took his life on Guam in 1975. At the same time we were seeing the beginnings of the suicide epidemic in the other islands of Micronesia.

* In Chuuk, the uncle of a young man who had killed a friend of his in a bar fight hanged himself. He blamed himself for teaching the young man to drink.
* In Pohnpei, a man hanged himself after he was arrested for killing his wife. He had just been severely scolded by his brother for his misdeed.
* In these and other early suicides, there was a real or imagined break with the family. The victim was responding to a situation in which either someone in the family offended him (anger) or in which he hurt another person in the family (shame).

Some people argued that suicide was heroic or sacrificial, surrendering one’s own life on behalf of the family. Suicide is just a typical Micronesian response to certain situations, they maintain. The assumed motive for the suicide is the victim’s love for his family. Yet, the data show very few suicides in 1950s and early 1960s. The young people in these years, as in earlier times, undoubtedly had problems with their families, but these problems must have been resolved in other ways–perhaps through keeping silence at home, or leaving home to wander among one’s relatives. For some reason, earlier generations did not seem to practice suicide as frequently.

Marshalls suicide

* Suicide said to have begun with the legendary suicide of Lajudokwa in late 19th century after his wife became interested in another man. Lajudokwa left off his passengers and sailed his canoe out in the face of a storm.
* There were few suicides in the early post-war years: two of suicides in 1950s and one in 1966, but the suicide epidemic really began in 1967 with the death of an Ebeye boy whose parents would not ask for the girl he wanted to marry. (He had a brother who committed suicide).
* Rapid growth of suicide in Marshalls:

No. Avg. No. Avg.

1965-69 6 1 1980-84 29 6

1970-74 20 4 1985-89 63 13

1975-79 30 6 1990-1994 62 12

* Note that there were 10 times as many suicides in 1989 as in 1969. Even if we allow for population increase, the rate is 5 times higher in recent years: 31 vs 6 per 100,000. The epidemic that had begun was taking more lives than cholera, dengue fever and other such plagues combined.

Rates of suicide in RMI compared with other parts of the region

* Although the number of suicides was increasing heavily in the Marshalls during the 1970s and 1980s, the same thing was happening everywhere else in Micronesia. Rates were growing rapidly during this period.
* When we compare the rates of other islands with the Marshalls, we see that RMI is far from the worst in suicide rates. The table on rates shows that there has not been a great deal of change during the last few years from the pattern since 1965. RMI’s rate since 1990 is 24. Pohnpei and Kosrae show lower rates, but the other three island groups are higher; Chuuk and Yap are much higher than RMI.
* The suicide epidemic was Micronesian-wide. It began in the late 1960s and became very serious by 1980. In all, 244 Marshallese and 636 from FSM were victims. The loss of life has been shocking. If youth are really our most valuable resource, as our leaders never tire of saying, then we clearly have a serious problem.

Why do Micronesians take their own lives?

The individual reasons boil down to a few basic motives:

* Anger or shame at someone in their family, usually older than they are. Victims seem to fear a break with their family. In the FSM nearly all the suicides are motivated by this. Examples: the young man who is refused a request by his father; the boy who is angry at his family for not asking for the hand of the girl he hopes to marry.
* Problems with a girlfriend or wife. This is true only of Palau and the Marshalls, not of the FSM. People in Chuuk and Pohnpei do not regard a wife or girlfriend as suitable reason for taking one’s life.

But why are so many individuals choosing to commit suicide today? There have always been frustrations for the young, but they used to work them out in other ways during earlier times. Why has the resort to suicide increased these days? Possible explanations:

* Young people are more frustrated today than they were in time gone by. The tensions between adults and young are growing. In other words, someone has turned up the heat under the kettle and the pot is boiling.
* The helps for coping that young people once had are no longer to be found. They cannot count on the same assistance from their extended family to help them through small crises. In other words, the lid has been taken off the pot and the water is spilling over.
* Whichever the case, something has clearly changed in society today and it is affecting the lives of our young.

Structural and social causes

* Example of bodies floating down river, some alive and some dead. We keep diving in to rescue victims, but there are always more floating along and we are tiring out. Upstream the bridge is broken. This is the reason people keep falling in water. Wouldn’t it make more sense to fix the bridge than keep pulling bodies out of the water?
* How do we know there’s a broken bridge? Can we be sure there are social causes behind the suicide epidemic?

+ The low suicide rates in the outer atolls, the more traditional areas, suggest that suicide is brought on in part by some aspect of modernization. Not just in Marshalls, but all of Micronesia. (The figures show that only 14% of suicides in the Marshalls occur in the outer atolls, where 25-30% of the population live.)

+ The suicide epidemic began in the late 1960s as social change intensified.and as the shape of the economy and the family itself was beginning to change.

+ My strong suspicion is that the family is the key to understanding the problem. Relations with the family is one of the most critical things in the life of any Micronesian, and damaged relationships figure in as the main cause of suicide.

Family and suicide

* The 24-year old boy who asked his father for money suspected his father didn’t love him, and later commited suicide. For him, love was expressed through food or material support. Perhaps 80% of all suicides are prompted by anger at parents or older members of family, although wives and girlfriends figure prominently in Marshallese suicides.
* What would have been different in the 1950s?

+ The boy might not have asked father for money in the first place, since there were uncles and others around to help support him.

+ Boy’s relationship with his father may have been more relaxed then. The father was not the sole disciplinarian, authority was shared.

+ If the father had turned down boy, other relatives might have explained why or interceded for him. Especially his grandparents.

+ Plenty of people had responsibility for the boy–those on the father’s side and mother’s side.

* Today we have a two-parent family rather than multi-parent family. Father-son relationship are more tense and there are fewer resources to help.

What can we do to help?

* 1) Get people thinking about fixing up the family - it’s a structure that’s been weakened. We probably can’t reconstitate the old extended family, but people can become aware of what’s needed.
* 2) Find ways of getting the family to talk with one another–eg, Mormon family evenings, prayer in family groups. To get family members talking to one another is difficult but necessary.
* 3) Grandparents, aunts or uncles are important in raising and supporting children, more than ever today. Even Americans recognize this. Keep these people in family if possible. Give them roles in raising children.
* 4) Kids are devising “love tests” for parents. (Eg, boy who suspects father doesn’t love him too much asks for money; the man who suspects his wife of cheating on him asks her to go to disco with him). You don’t have to give them whatever they want, but always do these two things:

- take the trouble to explain why you’re refusing them.

- assure them, in some way, that you love them.

Hence, we should change the equation: LOVE = FOOD (OR $) and help them understand that this formula does not always hold.

* 5) Use schools and churches to teach the young that suicide is selfish, not selfless, and harms the family and community greatly. Churches should proclaim this in practice, not just in speech–perhaps by a minimum of show at funerals. In Chuuk, no prayers are said at the grave of Catholic suicides. We must strip suicide of some of its glamor. How?
* 6) Develop clubs, organizations and youth activities to give young support of others and activities to absorb their interests. This protects young from disappointments in family, and also lessens their self-absorption.
* 7) Strong and healthy families are best means of prevention.

Conclusion

We ought to focus on what is most important. Let’s recognize that the bridge is broken and must be repaired if the problem is to be solved.

* We all have to work together on this, because it is too big for any one person or group.
* Let’s not delay. We have already lost 240 persons to suicide since 1965–about 8 persons a year on average. This is too great a loss of life to shrug off. Let’s do something about it.

FXH