



BLOG

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SHOULD WE STOP SAYING ‘COMMIT SUICIDE’?



by Carolyn Spring

‘Unfortunately, you’ve undone all the good you’ve done today.’

She was deadly serious and I was utterly perplexed. What was she talking about? I had spent the day delivering my training day ‘Dealing with Distress: Working with Suicide and Self-Harm.’ A tough day, but a good day. A day of hope for how to help people who see no other way through their pain but by taking their own lives. A day of guts-and-bowels emotion.

I waited for an explanation.

‘A few times you used the phrase ‘committed suicide,’ she explained, evidently irritated with my slowness. ‘It undoes all the good you do.’ I waited for her to expound. She complied. ‘The legal connotations of that phrase are so unhelpful. It undoes all the other good you do.’

Had I really invalidated my message of hope in the face of unbearable suffering by saying ‘commit suicide’? By saying it

three times in less than a minute, this lady evidently thought so. I felt like I’d just been stung by the undercover thought police.

If asked what verb goes with ‘suicide’ – ‘How do you do suicide?’ then many people’s response would undoubtedly be ‘commit’. People ‘commit suicide’. In common English usage there’s no other verb that associates with it so naturally. For right or for wrong, it’s a strongly bound word pairing. And yet the phrase ‘to commit suicide’ caused outright offence to the delegate from my course. She and others say that it reinforces the myth that suicide is a crime, placing it within a legal context, rather than seeing such distress without moral overtones.

I agree wholeheartedly that we should do whatever we can to reduce the distress of a suicidal person. In my training I argue that distress is the core problem, and that many of our ways of responding to people who are suicidal, such as by sectioning them, only increase their distress, which

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paradoxically exacerbates their risk of suicide.

There is nothing quite like the searing, unabating pain of suicidal distress. It was my frequent companion. Over a number of years, I made a number of suicide attempts. I had no hope that my suffering would relent, and I had no strategies for dealing with my distress. So suicide seemed like the only option. It wasn't, but it didn't feel like that. I was extremely vulnerable, even fragile. Arguably, what people did or didn't do around me could have had a fatal outcome.

So when we talk about suicide, should we adjust our language, as some are asking us to? Should we avoid saying 'commit suicide' in case this offends or in some way makes things worse for the suicidal person?

I understand the motivation behind the campaign for this, and I laud the compassion which drives it – to make it easier for people to ask for help when they are suicidal, rather than making it more difficult by moral insinuation. The intention here is to help, and who could disagree with that?

But I wonder if we're just being railroaded down a road of political correctness which deflects our attention from the real issue of actually, really, properly dealing with someone's distress? By fussing about our terminology, are we in fact missing the core issue of someone's pain? Does anyone actually kill

themselves, or fail to seek help, because someone said 'commit' to them at some point? Does it make a difference? Or is it a distraction from far more important issues?

I have to admit I feel deeply uncomfortable at this issue. The distress I felt that led to several suicide attempts was so profound, so unbearable. A discussion over the word 'commit' seems by comparison so shallow: the luxury of the non-suicidal. When your mind is on fire, you don't want to debate the connotations of words.

To check it out, I asked several people I know who are currently experiencing such suffering. All of them have made suicide attempts within the last year or so. It's not a scientific study but it takes a pulse. 'Does it bother you that people say 'commit suicide'?' I asked them all. Without fail, they all responded blankly. They had no idea what I was talking about. One woman in particular, her self-harm scars seeming to scream at me in offence, curled her lip down and looked like she was going to be sick: 'For fuck's sake,' she said, anger welling up in her eyes. 'People really don't give a shit about the pain I'm in, do they? They just want to argue about words.'

'Commit' is a neutral word, in and of its own. It's the verb that's used to describe someone simply doing something. Adultery isn't illegal, but people commit it. There's no legal connotation there,



at least not any more. I can't imagine that anyone committing adultery feel mistakenly ashamed of breaking the law. There are other negative connotations to the verb too: we may be committed to a psychiatric ward.

At a funeral the corpse is committed to the grave. And yet on the flip side, 'commit' has positive meaning. We commit to go to the gym. We commit to read more. We commit ourselves to people we love, to our careers, to our marriages, to our children. We honour our commitments. It's a word with a Latin origin, and hence perhaps an air of authority. *Com* means 'with'. *Mittere* is 'to put or send'. The Latin word combining both elements is *committere* 'to unite, to join, to entrust'. We entrust someone into custody. We unite together and form a committee. As we commit someone to the grave, we join dust to dust, ashes to ashes.

For me, it's just a word. Some people for sure will hear it as implying criminality; my guess is that most, like me, do not. I don't think its inappropriateness is as clear-cut as the lady on my course was implying. I don't think most people in using the term 'commit suicide' have the slightest thought of a criminal act – not any more. And by trying to outlaw the phrase, are we in fact making the association stronger, rather than weaker? It's certainly not something that had ever occurred to me until it was pointed out – in which case, it's a bit of

an own-goal. But there's a deeper issue here too.

Firstly, do people really not seek help when they're suicidal because they are offended by the use of the word 'commit', feel its legal implications, are concerned that people will think that they are engaging in a criminal act, and therefore hang back? I don't think so. People don't come forwards for help for many reasons, but I'm not sure this is one of them, and certainly not a major one.

More likely, they don't know who to approach for help, they are ambivalent about asking for help, their social engagement system is shut down by being in the traumatic state of mind called the 'suicidal mode', or they are ashamed at being in so much distress in the first place. It never once occurred to me to not seek help because people were using the word 'commit' alongside 'suicide'. Maybe it was just me, but my focus was always on the latter word. I was driven by pain and suffering and distress, far beyond sensitivity to the nuances of meaning.

Surely the bigger problem is that people experience so much distress in their lives, with such underdeveloped skills for managing it, that they become suicidal in the first place? Should we not be focusing our campaigning efforts instead on reducing sources of distress, and increasing people's resilience and coping capacities, giving them hope and giving



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them the support they need to deal with this distress, rather than policing our language? I'd rather keep the main thing the main thing. Secondly, many people want to help the deeply distressed and suicidal. They often don't know what to do or say. Will they be reluctant to get involved if we insist that only certain phrases are acceptable? 'I'm no good at this,' they may think. 'I'll make things worse. I obviously don't know what I'm doing. I even get the words wrong. I'd better not speak to a suicidal person in case I say the wrong thing.'

That's not helpful, is it? We need people to feel more confident about helping someone in emotional distress, not less. We need to reassure them that the worst thing they can do is to not say anything, rather than scaring them and making them feel that they won't get it right. People kill themselves, on the whole, when they are alone. That is a striking finding from research. There is no evidence to suggest that they kill themselves because people say 'commit suicide'. In fact, someone using all the 'wrong' words – but showing genuine empathy, compassion and care – is far more likely to help than hinder. If I were once again on the brink, I would prefer it if someone said, 'Please don't commit suicide' than nothing at all. I wouldn't really mind what they said.

I would only mind if they didn't seem to care. And if they're stumbling over their words, worried about what to say, they

might just come across as if they don't. We've got to get alongside people who are deeply distressed, even if that means saying the wrong things. We've got to show concern, give them hope, and then formulate a plan with them about how things are going to improve. We've got to relate deeply and authentically as human beings. And for many of us it's normal to say 'commit suicide' and we don't mean anything negative by it. Let's stop worrying that we'll use the wrong word. It's more important that we use any words than we feel so scared of reaching out to a suicidal person for fear of getting it wrong. The only way we get it wrong is if we don't reach out at all.

I have stopped using the phrase 'commit suicide' whenever possible. Sometimes, if I'm quoting someone else, I will use it because I cannot rewrite other people's words or the past. I want to be as sensitive as possible to people – that's not the issue. But sensitivity works both ways. And maybe we could all have a little more grace to each other, not to jump on each other for 'getting it wrong'? An outlook that has helped me immeasurably is that 'we're all doing the best we can': and if someone uses the 'wrong' language with the 'right' attitude, that to me is a lot better than the 'right' language with the 'wrong' attitude. So maybe let's agree to use less problematic language where we can, whilst not demonising those who still do? ●

