
DEALING WITH THE SUICIDAL The Work of the Samaritans

by **Ali**

It is easy to forget, or not to realise that when the Samaritans was founded by Chad Varah in 1953, attempted suicide was illegal. Anyone making a suicide attempt and surviving could be prosecuted for their crime. Samaritan volunteers were, therefore, listening to people who were contemplating an illegal act and, crucial to understanding the special nature of the Samaritan response, accepting that as a legitimate part of the person's thought. Whilst suicide is no longer illegal, the Samaritan response retains that refusal to condemn anyone for being in any way outside accepted societal models and norms. Instead the person who is in contact with a Samaritan volunteer is regarded as of paramount importance at that time. Their view of the world and way of living in it has validity and should never be criticised or attempts made to alter it by the Samaritan.

Even though attempted suicide is no longer illegal, it is still illegal to aid a suicide. Whilst no Samaritan would ever engage in helping a caller to commit suicide, either in practical terms or with advice, to listen to and befriend without judgement someone who feels despairing enough to end their own life is what

Samaritans do and most of society doesn't. The legal position of suicide is inherited from centuries of belief that to take one's own life was a crime against God and as such this belief is deeply ingrained in our culture. With the 1961 change in the law making it is no longer illegal to attempt to take one's own life, a major step forward was taken in giving each individual the power to make the most fundamental decision about themselves: whether to live or die.

However, society's present view of suicide is reflected in the existing bar on helping another person to put that decision into practice, "It is more O.K. than it was for someone to kill themselves, but it's something they must do by themselves and not involve anyone else". Thus if someone feels that life is simply not worth carrying on with (perhaps because they know they have a terminal illness, they suffer from depression or they cannot see a future without a lost loved one), to whom can they turn to share these thoughts? Obviously family and close friends have their responses affected by the threatened loss to themselves if suicide is eventually carried out. But society's model of suicide being a lone venture extends

into almost all areas into which the despairing person may take their sadness. The fellow traveller on the train is unlikely to be able to respond other than by moving as far away as possible; the professional, such as a G.P., pushed for time and untrained in this area, will want to stick to symptoms of definable illness before moving on to the next patient.

The Samaritan movement however, contrary perhaps to its apolitical claims, stands outside society's norms and uses "suicide" in its advertising and makes suicide a legitimate topic of conversation for all those who contact. Just as it is quite permissible to state in ordinary conversation that you feel tired, and that may mean that you are about to go to sleep or may mean that a few minutes break from what you are doing will raise your energy levels, so talking about suicide has many levels. It can mean whisky and a bottle of pills there and then: it can mean a vague feeling that things might be easier if you went to sleep for longer than usual. It would be a mistake to feel, however, that only those who have suicidal feelings can benefit from the Samaritans' non-judgmental response. For, just as those who feel suicidal are accepted, so are those callers whose sexuality, for instance, fails to fit into society's prevailing norms.

There are over 180 branches in Great Britain, all working within the framework of the same set of principles and practices, which have as the common theme the importance of providing an immediate

response to callers, who at all times remain independent individuals. Thus a Samaritan caller remains in charge of their own decisions, whether that be about taking their own life or ending contact with the Samaritans. Whilst Samaritans hope both individually and as an organisation that those who make contact will benefit, so that they become less despairing and no longer need Samaritan befriending, there are no set goals or therapeutic pathways. Perhaps more than in most one-to-one contacts where one of those involved has a "problem", Samaritan contacts give the caller a considerable degree of power within that relationship. This is, of course, consistent with the Samaritan view of people as individuals who, whatever their state, retain the ability and right to make their own decisions. This is carried through in the suggestions that might be made to a caller that she or he might contact some other specialist organisation as well. If the caller did not wish to follow this suggestion, this would be no bar to a continuing Samaritan contact: similarly, if contact were made with another organisation, the Samaritan befriending could continue too.

Consistent with this respect for the person making contact, a Samaritan's attentions will concentrate on that person, on their feelings and experiences. The anonymity of the Samaritan, known only by his or her first name, and the fact that the caller too can remain anonymous, shows that there is no need to be labelled. The caller's background,

family relationships, colour and sex do not have to enter at all. They can be introduced, of course, but stripped of all those labels that are used by society to put individuals into categories, the caller can explore her or his feelings without necessarily seeking explanation or solution.

However, the rule of confidentiality operating throughout Samaritans makes it possible for a person who has, for instance, broken the law to talk freely about the illegal act and their feelings about it without fear of the conversation being talked about outside the Samaritans. This enables befriending to be offered to those who might otherwise find it almost impossible to find anyone to listen without judging and then acting upon their knowledge.

The Samaritans aim to relieve feelings of despair by giving sole and undivided attention to anyone making contact by telephone, letter or in person. This befriending is guided by respect for every individual, enabling that person to present whatever they wish about themselves and their circumstances, knowing that this will remain confidential. By refusing to take society's normal reference points, such as names and addresses, and society's laws and prejudices as dominant, every Samaritan volunteer can use time with a caller to concentrate on their deepest and most painful feelings. It is hoped that befriending, whether it is only once or continued over an extended period of time, will provide the caller with enough unconditional and respectful support for him or her to move into a less despairing part of life.

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Peter Clark is an Accredited Teacher with the London Co-Counselling Community and a Continuity Person for the International Co-Counselling Community.

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