

can you hear me?

stories of people who have survived suicide attempts

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issue 2

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Tennessee Suicide
Prevention Network

"Saving Lives in Tennessee"

TSPN works across the state to eliminate the stigma of suicide and educate communities about the warning signs of suicide, with the ultimate goal of reducing suicide rates in the state of Tennessee.

TSPN's continued success is due in large part to volunteers willing to donate their time and energy.

If you would like to volunteer with TSPN, please call (615) 297-1077 or e-mail tspn@tspn.org

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

Thom Roberts originally gave these remarks at the Mid-Cumberland Suicide Prevention Awareness Month Event held at Nashville's Centennial Park on September 5.

I have been attending the TSPN regional meetings since 2003. I did so not thinking that I would one day need the support and guidance that I was being trained to give. I just wanted to see what I could do to reach out to those who were hurting.

2010 was the typical, "Best of Times, Worst of Times". When that year began, I was dating a great person who later I found to need a lot of support emotionally and physically. We stopped dating and just became really good close friends and we spent a lot of time together. As the summer of 2010 began, I started experiencing flashbacks of childhood abuse and so I started attending counseling sessions and taking prescribed medication (Seroquel and Cymbalta) that sent me spiraling quickly downward. I felt as if I was out of control in my life and wanted the reigns back. After being on both of these for several weeks, I decided to cease going to counseling and taking my medications "cold turkey" against the wishes of the counselor and psychiatrist. I wasn't thinking that I wanted to end my life or "kill" myself. I just wanted to fade away...take a long break...just to leave the bad feelings and the horrors the flashbacks and night terrors were giving me.

I continued to attend the TSPN meetings, workshops, and public events. I had started to think who would like to take my dogs that I loved and how to get away for a very long time. I began to distance myself from others and even creating fights just so people would leave me along. I had no concept of where I was taking my life. I just wanted the "pain" to end.

During that autumn, of 2010, a few people that worked close to me had noticed me stepping away from life. I thank Scott Ridgway, Lygia Williams, and Kim Rush for calming me down while I was spiking out of control. They may not have known, neither did I at the moment, but I was ready to end my life. Sadly, my "good friend" did very little to offer genuine support when I shared what was going on with me. My friend stated that it was too much drama. Little did he understand the "drama" that was going on deep inside of me.

In October I had a business trip to Northeast Tennessee. As I was driving to my destination, my "good friend" called me and said they needed to set up "healthy boundaries" and not to contact them ever again. That pushed me off the preverbal cliff I had been backing towards.



Photo of Thom Roberts, courtesy of the author.

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times (continued)

That night, I decided it was my time to fade away. I had enough pain. In my hotel room, I looked desperately for my full bottles of pain medication (Lortab and Darvocet) prescribed to me to deal with the pain from a recent surgery. I thought I had packed them but could not find them. I became angry. I was crying. I was hurting. I wanted to do anything it took right then and there to end all of the pain I was going through. I was determined. I called myself, "stupid" because I couldn't seem to do anything right. I couldn't even pack those pain medications.

In the midst of my out of control emotions I got a text from a true blue friend, Tom, asking how I was doing. I wrote back stating I was angry that I could not fade away but I was going to find out how to do it. He called. We talked and cried that night for hours until I fell asleep out of sheer exhaustion. He took the time trying to understand my chaotic life. He cared.

The next morning, he called and talked with me on the way back home to Nashville. He explained that my "good friend" was a fair weather friend; willing to hang out with me when things were great but leaving when his help was needed. These "fair weather friends" are not friends at all. Tom also made me promise that I would call my counselor and relay to her what had been going on. I did.

When I got home, the only items on my bathroom countertop were the two prescription bottles I was looking for in that hotel room. How did I miss those when I was packing for my business trip? I consider that to be simple Divine Providence. I'm still here. I did not die. I did not fade away. I am stronger and brighter than before my spiral downward. I'm not saying that every moment is perfectly blissful, but from the encouragement of my counselor and wisely chosen people in my life, I have been able to face today with a smile on my face.

If my life ended that night, I would have missed so many wonderful things; mostly I would have missed out on meeting the love of my life. I am grateful to those of you who reached out to keep me safe.

Don't fade away. You are amazing. You are stronger than you think you are. Use that strength to live. My Grandma Roberts told me that, "Troubles are like the waves of the ocean...they will come but they have to go."

Surrounding you are people who have bigger shoulders and stronger arms and hands than you realize. Find them. Sometimes being held means more than the words you will hear. We are willing and able to hold you when those waves of trouble seem overwhelming and will rejoice with you when they go back into the ocean. Please, if you want to "fade away" like I did, tell someone. It's worth the risk of losing your pride. We don't want you to fade. We want you to shine. There is hope.

"can you hear me?" wants your articles, poetry, prose, and artwork for the next issue and the ones to come. We'll also need suggestions and recommendations on how we can make it better.

If there's a piece you want to submit to the newsletter, send it to tspn@tspn.org with the subject line "CYMH Submission".

Feedback and suggestions can also be sent to this address with the subject line "CYMH Feedback".

You have a choice. Live or die.
Every breath is a choice.
Every minute is a choice.
Every time you don't throw yourself down the stairs,
that's a choice.
Every time you don't crash your car, you re-enlist.

Chuck Palahniuk, *Survivor*

I No Longer Fear Suicide

Jennifer Garing is an epidemiologist in Texas who works closely with her state's suicide prevention coordinator. Earlier this year she shared her story on "What Happens Now?", a blog for survivors of suicide attempts managed by the American Association of Suicidology (AAS). Read more stories like Jennifer's at attemptsurvivors.com

I was 13 the first time I tried to kill myself. Luckily, or unluckily, I lacked a certain sophistication with pharmaceuticals. I woke the next morning with a horrid hangover and the even more horrid realization that no one had noticed my attempt. It seemed ridiculous to point it out. After all, it wouldn't further my cause. I hadn't done it to gain attention. I was looking for an exit. So I quietly moved on, working most of my teen years in a chain drugstore and stifling my urge to purchase sleeping pills.

It was in college that I was finally diagnosed with and treated for the depression that had rattled me for so many years. They carefully doled out my medication so that I wasn't able to overdose on it, but they just didn't understand. There is an etiquette to suicide. At least, for me there is. Using antidepressants to commit suicide is completely against that etiquette. Why would you use the means to your salvation to affect your demise? And why would you when there are so many other options? There is an etiquette to suicide. But they never believed me.

Perhaps because they knew what depression can do to a person. Depression is a life wrecker. It swings in and topples your life and leaves you buried in collateral damage and in absolutely no condition to clean it up. As you lay there in the darkness, you see nothing but darkness. There are no memories of past happiness, of love, of hope, of sunlight. Why would you think it would ever be any different? Suicide is the rational option. It is the glowing red exit sign. It's the one right in front of you. You have to listen, listen very hard, for that oh-so-quiet voice of reason that is buried somewhere in the rubble. The voice that says, "You can come back."

You'd think that it would get easier once you come to understand it. But it doesn't. Being suicidal almost becomes a steady state, and looking for lethal objects becomes like looking for an emergency exit — your just-in-case solution. Looking back, it's a terrifying way to live. I used to be able to devise a suicide plan with any three objects. Name them. It might not be quick and it might not be pretty, but I could do it. That's how far gone I was.

In my mid-30s, I was obsessed with carbon monoxide poisoning. Then I woke up one night to an ugly realization. I had already destroyed my own plan. For my very first new car, I had purchased a hybrid, a car that didn't idle.



Regardless of what my mind had planned for me, I fought to stay in control. But my mind always had some evil trick, some plan to send me off the rails. With each episode, it would have some new plan that it would turn loose on me.

During that episode in my mid-30s, I had one thought that nagged at me continuously. It was probably my fifth or sixth really bad life-shattering episode of depression. My mind bombarded me with questions. How many times are you going to have to claw your way out of this same hole? How much time are you going to have to spend picking up the pieces? How much do you have to lose? How much longer are you going to work your butt off climbing out? When do you get to say you've given it your best shot, but you're tired and you're done?

I No Longer Fear Suicide (continued)

I finally voiced these thoughts to my therapist and he had one simple answer: "Not yet."

In my late 30s, my depression became treatment-resistant, and I sank into another episode. Although I had learned that you cannot control your mind, I had found that you can control your surroundings, your support system and your work situation. What could have been a life destroyer wasn't. I took leave from work, my mother and father came to help me out and my close friends and coworkers were somewhat prepared for the fallout.

I had lost a beloved great-aunt a decade earlier to Alzheimer's while I was finishing my masters thesis. Slowly, over a 20-year period, she slipped away and disintegrated until she became someone who bore no resemblance to her former self. A contorted vegetable, she could no longer feed herself, leave her bed or make any contact with another human being. I had quickly decided that that was the worst way to die. Not surprisingly, my mind was obsessed with the idea that I would spend the rest of my life dragging myself out of depressions until Alzheimer's took hold of my brain, losing the mind I had spent my whole life fighting to keep. The fear was nearly unbearable to live with, but I numbly fought back.

In the throes of a depression, your personality gets peeled away layer by layer until you are a mere ghost of yourself haunting your own life. You go through the motions, but they don't mean anything. I remember during this depression asking my mother if I had ever been happy, because I had no recollection of it. We sat there at my kitchen table, both wracking our brains for a solid memory of my happiness. Truth be told, my mother has the worst memory for these types of things, and I should have asked anyone else. But what we came up with was a piece of pure magic.

It was a Sunday afternoon when I had visited the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden and they had a butterfly exhibit in part of the conservatory. Late in the afternoon, I was alone in the exhibit. I remember sitting on a bench staring at the beautiful creatures fluttering around me and regaining, for the first time in years, that childhood sense of wonder — that feeling that anything is possible. And remembering those emotions, I could see beyond the darkness and hear that quietest of voices: "You can come back."

It helped that even in the depths of depression, I had myself anchored to the outside world, my parents, my sister, my nephews, my friends, my cat and my dog. By this point, I was bound and determined that this depression that had taken so much from me would not get the balance of my life, and I would not be an accomplice in my own demise.

I no longer fear suicide. There are things I feel unsafe around—high open balconies, exposed beams, straight-edged razors—but I don't think it makes me less of a person to avoid such things. I know my limits. I don't think I would ever actually hurt myself, I just don't like how these things make me feel. It's kind of like the same unsafe, out-of-control feeling I get on roller coasters. I suppose some people like to feel like that, but I've felt out of control enough of my life. I don't need to put myself in those situations.

These days, I anchor myself to my surroundings. I hold tightly to the things I love. I keep reminders of those things that give me hope and remind me that the world is full of wonder and possibility. Because I know that there will be days when I need to be reminded of these facts. I will do everything in my power to prevent these days from happening, but I know they will come.

The one thing I will always know for sure is that the only constant in life is change. No matter how bad things get, they will always get better, even if they have to get worse first. I cling to that.

The most authentic thing about us is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure, to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

Ben Okri

Suicide Anonymous

Suicide Anonymous (SA) is a self-help program based on the model of Alcoholics Anonymous. It provides a safe environment for people to share their struggles with suicide and to develop strategies for recovery from suicidal preoccupation and behavior.

Suicidal people do not have safe places to talk honestly about their struggles with suicide. The stigma towards suicide pervades every segment of our society, including religious organizations and even the mental health field. SA, therefore, exists to offer a support system for survivors, to make a distinction between the suicide attempt and the person involved, to cast off the societal stigma that too often plagues the survivor, and to develop strategies for mutual support and healing.

During each meeting, a chairperson presents topics and members share their experiences or simply listen. Members also provide updates about how they are dealing with their suicidal impulses. Talking openly about suicide with people who understand the problem lessens the shame and stigma, combats isolation, and shows that it is safe to reach out for support in a crisis. In sharing their stories, members overcome the shame and stigma of a life of struggle with suicide. Meanwhile, listeners identify with the story or break through denial of the extent of their own struggles.

New participants pick experienced members to guide them through the Twelve Steps model. They also exchange phone numbers with group members as a resource for crises between meetings. Members learn to reach out to fellow members for support in a suicidal crisis. They also get to experience the other end of a suicide crisis.

Members also select bottom-line behaviors for themselves. These are component behaviors of suicidality like hoarding pills, suicidal fantasies, compulsively driving through cemeteries, etc. Members commit to stop bottom-line behaviors one day at a time, and these behaviors may change with progress in recovery.

Several SA groups are available for viewing and participation via Skype. More information is available at suicide.anonymous0811@gmail.com.

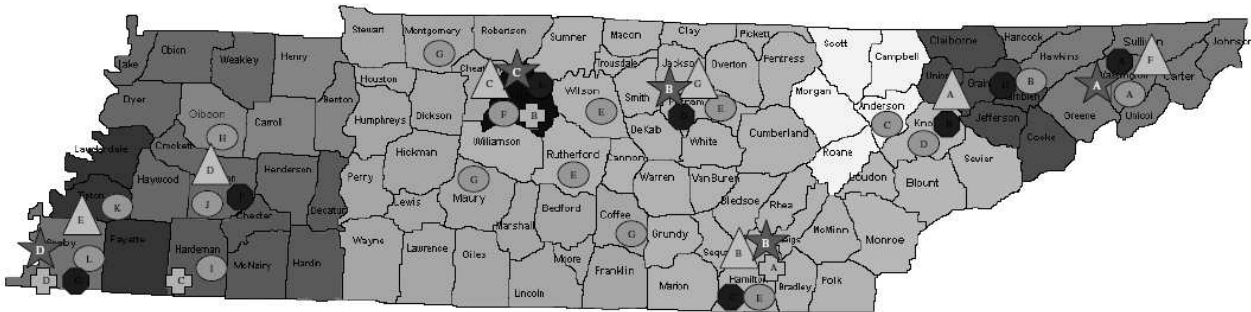
Available Skype sessions:

Meeting time	Meeting name	Host city
Every Monday, 10 AM Central / 11 AM Eastern	World Wide Meeting	None
Every Tuesday, 6 PM Central / 7 PM Eastern	Grateful Blossom	Westmont, New Jersey
Every Sunday, 6:30 PM Central / 7:30 PM Eastern	Hope Group	Cordova, TN
Second and Fourth Thursdays, 6 PM Central / 7 PM Eastern	Rise Above	Lumberton, NJ

The SA website (suicideanonymous.net) features more information about the group, such as details about its World Service Committee and about the Little Book, the guiding document, which discusses the problem of suicide addiction from the viewpoint of the person affected. Interested parties may also contact the group directly at info@suicideanonymous.net or (901) 654-7673.



Crisis Resources in Your Area



CRISIS TEAMS – CRISIS STABILIZATION UNITS – REGIONAL MENTAL HEALTH INSTITUTES – MEDICALLY MONITORED CRISIS DETOXIFICATION

Mobile Crisis Teams

- A Frontier Health
- B Cherokee Health Systems
- C Ridgeview Psychiatric Hospital & Center
- D Helen Ross McNabb
- E Volunteer Behavioral Health
- F Mental Health Co-Operative
- G Centerstone Community MHC
- H Carey Counseling Center
- I Quinco Community MHC
- J Pathways of Tennessee
- K Professional Care Services
- L Southeast Mental Health Center

Crisis Stabilization Units/Walk-in Center

- A Frontier Health
- B Helen Ross McNabb Center
- C Volunteer Behavioral Health – Chattanooga
- D Volunteer Behavioral Health – Cookeville
- E Mental Health Co-Operative
- F Pathways of Tennessee
- G Southeast Mental Health Center
- H Cherokee Health Systems

Respite Services

- A Frontier Health
- B Volunteer Behavioral Health
- C Mental Health Co-Operative
- D Southeast Mental Health Center

RMHI

- A Moccasin Bend Mental Health Institute
- B Middle TN Mental Health Institute
- C Western Mental Health Institute
- D Memphis Mental Health Institute

MMCD

- A Helen Ross McNabb
- B CADAS
- C Buffalo Valley
- D Pathways
- E Serenity
- F Frontier
- G Volunteer

This map of crisis response teams and facilities is provided to TSPN courtesy of Melissa Sparks, Director of the Office of Crisis Services and Suicide Prevention within the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse's Division of Mental Health Services. More information about these facilities is available from Ms. Sparks at (615) 253-4641 or melissa.sparks@tn.gov

Need Help Right Now?

Feelings of hopelessness, feeling trapped, feeling like a burden to others, increased alcohol or drug consumption, sleeping too little or too much, and withdrawing or feeling isolated from others are signs that you or a loved one may need help now.

If you or a loved one are feeling suicidal, please seek help immediately. Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK or visit www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org

NATIONAL
SUICIDE PREVENTION
LIFELINE™
1-800-273-TALK
www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org