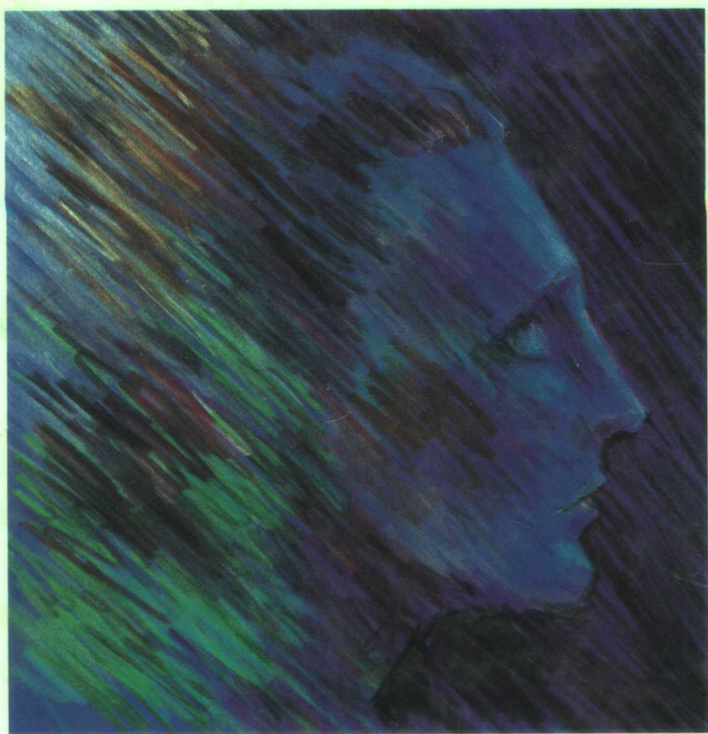


SUICIDE

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS®



OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS SERIES®

**The
Opposing Viewpoints
series continues
to win acclaim
in leading book review
journals.**

**The following is excerpted from *Booklist*,
the journal of the American Library Association:**

"Each volume in the opposing viewpoints series could serve as a model . . . not only providing access to a wide diversity of opinions, but also stimulating readers to do further research for group discussion and individual interest. Both shrill and moderate, the selections—by experts, policy makers, and concerned citizens—include complete articles and speeches, long book excerpts, and occasional cartoons and boxed quotations . . . all up-to-date and fully documented. The editing is intelligent and unobtrusive, organizing the material around substantive issues within the general debate. Brief introductions to each section and to each reading focus the questions raised and offer no slick answers."

Greenhaven Press, Inc.

ISBN: 0-89908-193-2

SUICIDE

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS®



David L. Bender & Bruno Leone, *Series Editors*

Michael Biskup, *Book Editor*

Carol Wekesser, *Assistant Editor*

OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS SERIES®



Greenhaven Press, Inc. PO Box 289009 San Diego, CA 92198-9009

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electrical, mechanical, or otherwise, including, but not limited to, photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Suicide : opposing viewpoints / Michael Biskup, book editor,
& Carol Wekesser, assistant editor

p. cm.—(Opposing viewpoints series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Summary: Presents opposing viewpoints on various aspects of suicide, including individual rights, physician-assisted suicide, and prevention.

ISBN 0-89908-193-2 (lib.: alk. paper).—ISBN 0-89908-168-1 (pbk. : alk. paper).

1. Suicide—United States. 2. Suicide—Moral and ethical aspects. 3. Teenagers—United States—Suicidal behavior.

[1. Suicide.] I. Biskup, Michael, 1956- . II. Wekesser, Carol, 1963- . III. Series (Unnumbered)

HV6548.U5S86 1992

362.2'8'0973—dc20

92-6093

CIP

AC

Copyright © 1992 by Greenhaven Press, Inc.

Contents

	Page
Why Consider Opposing Viewpoints?	9
Introduction	13
Chapter 1: Is Suicide an Individual Right?	
Chapter Preface	16
1. Suicide Is an Individual Right	17
<i>Richard W. Momeyer</i>	
2. Suicide Is Not an Individual Right	24
<i>Victor G. Rosenblum & Clarke D. Forsythe</i>	
3. Suicide Can Be a Rational Choice	31
<i>Alan W. Johnson</i>	
4. Suicide Can Never Be a Rational Choice	38
<i>Leon R. Kass</i>	
A Critical Thinking Activity: The Ability to Empathize	44
Periodical Bibliography	47
Chapter 2: Should Physicians Assist Terminally Ill Patients in Suicide?	
Chapter Preface	49
1. Physicians Can Ethically Assist in Suicide	51
<i>Sidney H. Wanzer et al.</i>	
2. Physicians Cannot Ethically Assist in Suicide	57
<i>David Orentlicher</i>	
3. Physician-Assisted Suicide Should Be Legal	62
<i>Jack Kevorkian</i>	
4. Physician-Assisted Suicide Should Not Be Legal	69
<i>Daniel Callahan</i>	
A Critical Thinking Activity: Understanding Words in Context	76
Periodical Bibliography	78

Chapter 3: What Are the Causes of Teen Suicide?

Chapter Preface	80
1. Stress Causes Teen Suicide	81
<i>Judith M. Stillion, Eugene E. McDowell & Jacques H. May</i>	
2. Guns in the Home Cause Teen Suicide	88
<i>David A. Brent et al.</i>	
3. Alcohol and Drug Abuse Causes Teen Suicide	94
<i>Marc A. & Judith J. Schuckit</i>	
4. Society's Rejection of Homosexual Teens Causes Suicide	100
<i>Paul Gibson</i>	
5. The Decline of Religion and Family Causes Teen Suicide	108
<i>Allan C. Carlson</i>	
6. There Is No Single Cause of Teen Suicide	114
<i>George Howe Colt</i>	
A Critical Thinking Activity: Distinguishing Between Fact and Opinion	121
Periodical Bibliography	123

Chapter 4: How Can Suicide Be Prevented?

Chapter Preface	125
1. Suicide Prevention Centers Can Help Prevent Suicide	127
<i>George Howe Colt</i>	
2. Education Can Help Prevent Suicide	135
<i>Judith M. Stillion, Eugene E. McDowell & Jacques H. May</i>	
3. The Media Can Help Prevent Suicide	143
<i>Alan L. Berman</i>	
4. Changes in Society Can Help Prevent Suicide	151
<i>David Lester</i>	
5. Intervention by Friends Can Help Prevent Suicide	158
<i>Suicide Prevention and Crisis Center of San Mateo County, California</i>	

6. Improving the Lives of the Elderly Can Prevent Suicide	162
<i>Alexander C. Morgan</i>	
A Critical Thinking Activity: Evaluating Suicide Education Courses	170
Periodical Bibliography	173
Organizations to Contact	174
Annotated Book Bibliography	180
Index	185

"Congress shall make no law . . .
abridging the freedom of speech,
or of the press."

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

The basic foundation of our democracy is the first amendment guarantee of freedom of expression. The Opposing Viewpoints Series is dedicated to the concept of this basic freedom and the idea that it is more important to practice it than to enshrine it.

Why Consider Opposing Viewpoints?

"It is better to debate a question without settling it than to settle a question without debating it."

Joseph Joubert (1754-1824)

The Importance of Examining Opposing Viewpoints

The purpose of the Opposing Viewpoints Series, and this book in particular, is to present balanced, and often difficult to find, opposing points of view on complex and sensitive issues.

Probably the best way to become informed is to analyze the positions of those who are regarded as experts and well studied on issues. It is important to consider every variety of opinion in an attempt to determine the truth. Opinions from the mainstream of society should be examined. But also important are opinions that are considered radical, reactionary, or minority as well as those stigmatized by some other uncomplimentary label. An important lesson of history is the eventual acceptance of many unpopular and even despised opinions. The ideas of Socrates, Jesus, and Galileo are good examples of this.

Readers will approach this book with their own opinions on the issues debated within it. However, to have a good grasp of one's own viewpoint, it is necessary to understand the arguments of those with whom one disagrees. It can be said that those who do not completely understand their adversary's point of view do not fully understand their own.

A persuasive case for considering opposing viewpoints has been presented by John Stuart Mill in his work *On Liberty*. When examining controversial issues it may be helpful to reflect on this suggestion:

The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject, is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion, and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this.

Analyzing Sources of Information

The Opposing Viewpoints Series includes diverse materials taken from magazines, journals, books, and newspapers, as well as statements and position papers from a wide range of individuals, organizations, and governments. This broad spectrum of sources helps to develop patterns of thinking which are open to the consideration of a variety of opinions.

Pitfalls to Avoid

A pitfall to avoid in considering opposing points of view is that of regarding one's own opinion as being common sense and the most rational stance, and the point of view of others as being only opinion and naturally wrong. It may be that another's opinion is correct and one's own is in error.

Another pitfall to avoid is that of closing one's mind to the opinions of those with whom one disagrees. The best way to approach a dialogue is to make one's primary purpose that of understanding the mind and arguments of the other person and not that of enlightening him or her with one's own solutions. More can be learned by listening than speaking.

It is my hope that after reading this book the reader will have a deeper understanding of the issues debated and will appreciate the complexity of even seemingly simple issues on which good and honest people disagree. This awareness is particularly important in a democratic society such as ours where people enter into public debate to determine the common good. Those with whom one disagrees should not necessarily be regarded as enemies, but perhaps simply as people who suggest different paths to a common goal.

Developing Basic Reading and Thinking Skills

In this book, carefully edited opposing viewpoints are purposely placed back to back to create a running debate; each viewpoint is preceded by a short quotation that best expresses the author's main argument. This format instantly plunges the reader into the midst of a controversial issue and greatly aids that reader in mastering the basic skill of recognizing an author's point of view.

A number of basic skills for critical thinking are practiced in the activities that appear throughout the books in the series. Some of the skills are:

Evaluating Sources of Information. The ability to choose from among alternative sources the most reliable and accurate source in relation to a given subject.

Separating Fact from Opinion. The ability to make the basic distinction between factual statements (those that can be demonstrated or verified empirically) and statements of opinion (those that are beliefs or attitudes that cannot be proved).

Identifying Stereotypes. The ability to identify oversimplified, exaggerated descriptions (favorable or unfavorable) about people and insulting statements about racial, religious, or national groups, based upon misinformation or lack of information.

Recognizing Ethnocentrism. The ability to recognize attitudes or opinions that express the view that one's own race, culture, or group is inherently superior, or those attitudes that judge another culture or group in terms of one's own.

It is important to consider opposing viewpoints and equally important to be able to critically analyze those viewpoints. The activities in this book are designed to help the reader master these thinking skills. Statements are taken from the book's viewpoints and the reader is asked to analyze them. This technique aids the reader in developing skills that not only can be applied to the viewpoints in this book, but also to situations where opinionated spokespersons comment on controversial issues. Although the activities are helpful to the solitary reader, they are most useful when the reader can benefit from the interaction of group discussion.

Using this book and others in the series should help readers develop basic reading and thinking skills. These skills should improve the reader's ability to understand what is read. Readers should be better able to separate fact from opinion, substance from rhetoric, and become better consumers of information in our media-centered culture.

This volume of the Opposing Viewpoints Series does not advocate a particular point of view. Quite the contrary! The very nature of the book leaves it to the reader to formulate the opinions he or she finds most suitable. My purpose as publisher is to see that this is made possible by offering a wide range of viewpoints that are fairly presented.

David L. Bender
Publisher

Introduction

"The man who voluntarily kills himself in anger does an act contrary to a just law."

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

"Just as I shall select my ship when I am about to go on a voyage, or my house when I propose to take a residence, so I shall choose my death when I am about to depart from life."

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales*

For most of the last fifteen hundred years, much of Western civilization considered suicide an immoral act committed by the sinful or insane. This view, an outgrowth of Christianity, began to spread across Europe as the new religion took root in the first centuries after Christ. Although the Bible says little about suicide specifically, Christian authorities interpreted the biblical commandment "Thou shalt not kill" as a prohibition against suicide.

By the Middle Ages, the tenets of the Catholic church dominated Western thought. These tenets held killing oneself to be one of the few sins that guaranteed everlasting condemnation in hell. Thirteenth-century theologian St. Thomas Aquinas stated this view in his work *Summa Theologica*: "Whoever takes his own life, sins against God. . . . For it belongs to God alone to pronounce sentence of life and death." Not only was suicide considered a mortal sin, many people also believed it to be a sign of insanity or satanic possession. "All persons who kill themselves are impotent in mind," philosopher Benedict de Spinoza wrote in 1677.

This view of suicide remained unchallenged for hundreds of years. Suicide was considered such a taboo that there was little if any debate concerning its morality until the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, when a few philosophers, such as David Hume, challenged the taboo. Hume believed that the free will that God gave humans included the freedom to take one's life. This was especially true, Hume argued, when life became un-

bearable: "That suicide may often be consistent with interest and with our duty to *ourselves*, no one can question, who allows that age, sickness, or misfortune may render life a burden, and make it worse even than annihilation."

Although Hume's view remains in the minority to this day, it has gained more prominence. Now that physicians can prolong the lives of dying patients, sometimes beyond the point at which life has value, some people end up living in vegetative states, or physically or mentally unable to care for themselves. These people become a burden to their families and society. Some of these patients have turned to suicide as a way to end their pain and hasten their deaths.

Advocates for the terminally ill have established organizations such as The Hemlock Society to assist the dying in committing suicide. In the United States, the right-to-die movement has spurred groups in several states to hold public initiatives to legalize physician-assisted suicide. These initiatives have been extremely controversial, with opponents arguing that legalizing physician-assisted suicide is tantamount to legalizing murder, and that the end result will be an epidemic of suicide and the wanton killing of the weak, ill, and disabled.

Suicide: Opposing Viewpoints addresses these issues and others in the following chapters: Is Suicide an Individual Right? Should Physicians Assist Terminally Ill Patients in Suicide? What Are the Causes of Teen Suicide? How Can Suicide Be Prevented? Suicide is a highly emotional issue. By reading the viewpoints in this book, the editors hope the reader will gain a more thorough understanding of the controversies surrounding this sensitive topic.

1 CHAPTER

Is Suicide an Individual Right?

SUICIDE



Chapter Preface

The November 4, 1989 issue of the *New York Times* related the story of an eighty-three-year-old widow whose health was declining rapidly after major surgery. Because of blocked arteries, the widow was vulnerable to a stroke that could either kill her or leave her mentally incompetent. Since she could not justify becoming a burden to herself or to anyone in her family, she began contemplating suicide. While the widow's ultimate decision is never revealed, her story is similar to the stories of many Americans whose severe illnesses lead them to weigh a future filled with pain against the option of suicide. This issue has come to be known as the right-to-die debate.

Right-to-die proponents contend that it respects individual freedom and dignity. In a speech before the Forum of Medical Affairs, Eva M. Skinner of the American Association of Retired Persons said, "Dignity comes with our ability to maintain control over our bodies." Advocates believe suicide can be a rational choice when weighed against the prospects of a life that involves pain and suffering which medical treatment cannot alleviate. In an editorial to the *San Diego Tribune*, Richard Stratton notes that "The right to a 'good death' when the quality has been shattered beyond repair is not only important, but is vital. A law establishing that right would be the hallmark of an advanced, rational, and compassionate civilization." Proponents support the establishment of laws that would respect an individual's right to die.

Those who oppose passing such laws believe that people who are terminally ill and want to die are deeply depressed and require help. In a December 4, 1991, *New York Times* article, Dr. David C. Clark of the American Association of Suicidology is quoted as saying, "A person who is severely depressed can't think rationally about suicide. When he says he wants to kill himself, that's the depression talking, compromising his judgment." The studies from this article point out that those who face death from illness and who contemplate suicide are reaching out for help and can be treated for their depression. Opponents contend that laws establishing the right to die would encourage the elderly or terminally ill to commit suicide to avoid being an emotional and financial burden to their family or society.

The issue of an individual right to die sparks a debate that forces society to reevaluate its views on suicide and how these beliefs affect its acceptance today. The following articles focus on this issue.