

Is Suicide Contagious?

In 1983, *The New York Times* ran [a story titled](#) “MICRONESIA’S MALE SUICIDE RATE DEFIES SOLUTION.” The story opened with this nut graph:

In the islands of Micronesia, young men are killing themselves at one of the highest rates in the world, researchers say, and no one knows what to do about it.

Suicides among males between the ages of 15 and 30 are so prevalent that they have become an accepted method of problem-solving in the island societies where harmony is highly prized, according to the Rev. Francis Hezel and Dr. Don Rubinstein.

The suicide rate in the United States in 2014 was about 13 per 100,000 individuals—an increase of about 15 percent from a decade earlier, according to statistics from the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. It is the tenth leading cause of death in America.

In the Truk Islands in 1983, an island chain of 40,000 people, males between the ages of 15 and 25 were committing suicide at a rate of 250 per 100,000. It was the leading cause of death for youths in Truk. And nobody seemed to know why.

The *Times* cited multiple tragic and bizarre anecdotes shared by a local Jesuit priest, including the story of a 16-year-old boy who hanged himself after his father refused to give him \$1.

The strangest part was that just a couple of decades earlier suicide rates had been normal or even non-existent in most parts of Micronesia. So what changed?

In his book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell shares the story of a young man, a scion of a wealthy family, who in the

mid 1960s secretly became involved with two women at once. He ultimately fathered children with each woman, and the result was a Shakespearean tragedy. Gladwell writes:

Unable to make up his mind between them, he hanged himself in romantic despair. At his funeral, his two lovers, learning of the existence of the other for the first time, fainted on his grave.

The community, an island named Ebeye which had a population of about 6,000, had not had a documented suicide from 1955-1965. But three days after the scion's death another love-torn young man took his own life. He was followed by 25 young people in Ebeye who took their own lives over the next 12 years, and soon the practice was almost a fad throughout Micronesia.

Anthropologist Donald Rubinstein, quoted by Gladwell, said this:

Thus as suicide grows more frequent in these communities the idea itself acquires a certain familiarity if not fascination to young men, and the lethality of the act seems to be trivialized. Especially among some younger boys, the suicide acts appear to have acquired an experimental almost recreational element.

What can we make of this?

Gladwell's book, which is worth reading, examines how ideas often go viral and spread like a contagion, which is fine when the idea or product spreading is something benign, such as a book or trendy sneakers. But suicide?

And then it occurred to me that the suicide statistics of U.S. veterans is pretty alarming. While it has yet to reach "epidemic" proportions (the 22 per day figure disseminated in 2012 by the VA and advocacy group was not accurate), the VA Secretary Bob McDonald [said](#) rates have risen steadily since

1999. (Indeed, the suicide rate of middle-aged white men in general is [a disturbing trend](#).)

Additionally, it's not hard to find the many ways Americans are also influenced in extremely harmful ways by trends, such as drug use and smoking.

The most salient takeaway of the Micronesia suicides for me, however, is this: it shows the creepy degree human behavior can influence behavior. And, if you're like me, you are probably already wondering how and to what degree you are being influenced.

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