

# Psychologist: America's Suicide Crisis Linked to 'Lack of Meaning'

As an addendum to [my blogpost from a couple of weeks ago](#) (and to [Shelia Liaugminas' subsequent, related post](#)) I would like to share this piece published in the New York Times. Clay Routledge, professor of psychology from North Dakota State University, has [tried to account](#) for the alarming rise in suicides across the US since 1999.

Many argue that the rise in suicides is a symptom of a failing mental health care system: people are not getting the services that they need and that more effective drugs, better therapy and greater access to treatment is needed. Routledge however, is not convinced. He notes that more people are seeking treatment for depression and anxiety, treatment for these conditions has become more widely available and yet still the suicide rate has increased.

Instead, Routledge argues that the suicide crisis in the USA is in part a crisis of meaning. Recent changes in American society, greater detachment and a weaker sense of belonging, are increasing our existential despair. Although we try and distract ourselves (most of the time nowadays successfully) we realise that everyone we know and care about, including the person we care about the most, ourselves, will die. Despite our best attempts at avoiding it, we understand that pain and sorrow is part and parcel of life. But what is the point of life? One way in which we keep this existential anxiety quiet, Routledge argues that we "must find and maintain perceptions of our lives as meaningful". We seek not only to live, but to have a meaningful existence. And when we don't feel like our lives matter, then we are psychologically vulnerable.

According to Routledge, empirical studies bear this out. If we feel that there is a lack of meaning in our lives, then we are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, become depressed, anxious and commit suicide. Further it is those that feel their lives have meaning who are best able to cope with loss and trauma.

And the changing landscape in the USA is undermining people's sense of

meaning. The decline of neighbourliness, the shrinking of the family and the diminishing of religion are all posing “serious threats to a meaning of life”. Americans today are less likely to know and interact with their neighbours, they are less likely to believe that people are generally trustworthy and to feel that they have individuals they can confide in. And then families are becoming smaller – people are marrying later and having fewer children. Meaning fewer brothers and sisters, but also fewer uncles, aunties and cousins to connect with and be supported by. Furthermore, Routledge notes that adults with children are more focused on matters of meaning than childless adults while parents experience a greater sense of meaningfulness when they are engaged in activities that involve taking care of children. Finally, the institutional and social scaffolding for a meaningful life that religion brings is also failing. More Americans, particularly young Americans, are less likely to identify with a religious faith, attend church or engage in other religious practices.

In so many areas the traditional ways of providing meaning to people’s lives are disappearing. And in their place is: rancorous political divisions. Routledge notes that there are studies that show that “when presented with existentially threatening ideas (such as reminders of their mortality), people respond with increased bias toward their own worldview, particularly if they are not finding meaning in their life through other sources. In this way, our fractious political culture may be fueled not just by ideological disagreement, but also by a desperate search, common to all lost souls, to find meaning anywhere we can.”

So have Americans swapped the family, neighbourliness and religion for MAGA rallies and #resistance? No wonder suicides are on the rise.

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