

Suicide in America Is Surging. What's Driving This Mentality of Despair?

With the sudden passing of designer [Kate Spade](#) and TV personality [Anthony Bourdain](#)—both of whom authorities believe took their own life—it's easy to wonder if an epidemic of suicide is upon us.

As it turns out, such ponderings are not far-fetched, a fact which the well-timed release of a [CDC report](#) on suicide explains. According to the CDC, suicide claimed the lives of 45,000 Americans in 2016. In the last twenty years, suicide rates have increased by 30 percent in half of U.S. states.

Of course, many of those who commit suicide are [veterans](#), and thus the explosion of wars in recent years could be one explanation for the rise in suicide, given the mental strain such traumatic activity brings.

But another surprising statistic about suicides is that half of those who commit them do not have a “known mental health condition.” What gives? Why the heightened level of despair, leading suicide to become one of the primary causes of death, particularly among individuals [between the ages of 15 and 34](#)?

The research of University of Chicago professor Allan Bloom sheds some light on this increase in despair. In his 1988 book, [The Closing of the American Mind](#), Bloom noted a difference between the college students of that day compared to those of several years before. They were “superficial” and continually indulged in “clichés,” never seeming able to reason on a deeper level. Underneath this superficiality, Bloom perceived a sense of despair and “disenchantment” with the world, a fact which he traced back to the abandonment of moral values that once permeated the culture:

“The moral education that is today supposed to be the great responsibility of the family cannot exist if it cannot present to the imagination of the young a vision of a moral cosmos and of the rewards and punishments for good and evil, sublime speeches that accompany and interpret deeds, protagonists and antagonists in the drama of moral choice, a sense of the stakes involved in such choice, and the despair that results when the world is ‘disenchanted.’”

Bloom goes on to note that parents have difficulty passing on these essential moral values because they themselves don't know what they believe. When schools try to do the same, the watered-down nature of the values makes them synthetic. Bloom continues:

*“This gradual stilling of the old political and religious echoes in the souls of the young accounts for the difference between the students I knew at the beginning of my teaching career and those I face now. The loss of the books has made them narrower and flatter. Narrower because they lack what is most necessary, a real basis for discontent with the present and awareness that there are alternatives to it. **They are both more contented with what is and despairing of ever escaping from it. The longing for the beyond has been attenuated. The very models of admiration and contempt have vanished. Flatter, because without interpretations of things, without the poetry or the imagination's activity, their souls are like mirrors, not of nature, but of what is around.**”*

Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain grew up in the era described by Bloom. Is it possible that their despair had its roots in a society which shunned values and watered down its morals, leaving them with little purpose and meaning for which to live? And if such was the case with their generation... what will it be for those who are coming behind them?

[Image Credit: [Max Pixel](#)]