

Posting a hotline number isn't enough; Break down doors to prevent a suicide

By AMY NEWLOVE SCHROEDER

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It's a cultural cliché that we Americans are embarrassingly open about our feelings. But we're not. We're just good at faking it, smiling broadly and blithely asserting, "Everything's good."

Last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the shocking statistic that the suicide rate in the U.S. is up by 30% compared with 1999, an announcement that was bookended by the deaths of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain. Ever since, we've been flooding social media with posts about suicide hotlines and poignant RIP remembrances of the designer and the chef. Such responses are equivalent to the "thoughts and prayers" that so often accompany school shootings. And they are just as ineffective at preventing another tragedy.

How could they do it? Why didn't they get help? How could two people that successful end their lives? If these conversations sound familiar, it's because they are: We said the same things last year about Soundgarden's Chris Cornell and Linkin Park's Chester Bennington.

Here's what many people — many *lucky* people — don't understand about depression. It doesn't matter how much money you have in the bank; it doesn't matter how beautiful you are, or how popular, or how successful. Depression doesn't care. It is like demonic possession. Actually, it is possession. You lose your agency. You lose perspective. You are in a dark tunnel, and it just keeps getting narrower and darker until you can see only one option, one way to end unbearable pain. It doesn't seem selfish; it doesn't seem sad. It looks like the light at the end of the tunnel, and it feels like relief.

I should know. I have suffered from depression since I was a kid. At 10, I wrote in my diary, "Don't be so depressed now. You'll have plenty of time when you are grown-up." My 10-year-old self was prescient: I have been on and off antidepressants since my 20s, and I have had at least two bouts of major depression. Two years ago, it happened again. It was my birthday, and a friend took me to a beautiful ocean-side restaurant in Malibu. I spent the whole of the extravagant meal gazing out the window, saying almost nothing. I wasn't admiring the view: I was thinking about hurling myself into the sea.

I couldn't tell my friend how sick I was because I felt guilty and ashamed. She spent a small ransom on a lobster lunch; how could I say I hadn't even tasted the food? That afternoon, I saw another friend, A., and told her that I was feeling low. A suicide survivor, A. sensed that it was more than the blues. The following day, I wasn't answering the phone or responding to texts. A. drove to my house, used a crowbar to pry open the front door of my building, and then busted through a window screen to get into my courtyard apartment.

Comment [1]: So true. This acknowledgement really establishes her frank tone from the very beginning. She wants us to look beyond the plastic smiles of those who are hurting.

Comment [2]: Logos - timely statistic (last week) adds credibility to Schroeder's argument. She is blending together the logical and the emotional here.

Comment [3]: Pathos - This is an emotional appeal since both of these celebrities were well-known and a part of the culture and fabric of this country. She is appealing to the grief the nation is feeling in losing these two icons.

Comment [4]: Connection to recent news cycle regarding school shootings. Words are not enough; they must be accompanied by action in order to truly make a difference.

Comment [5]: Rhetorical questions are used here to ask what we all were thinking when we heard about Spade and Bourdain. This creates a connection to the audience because Schroeder is reinforcing the reactions we all had after hearing the news.

Comment [6]: The mention of these two men is two-fold: if Bourdain or Spade were not celebs you connected to, perhaps you have been affected by the deaths of one of these musicians. In addition, it again reminds us how widespread the problem is.

Comment [7]: Interesting syntax choice with both the dashes and italics. Dashes serve to physically separate those individuals off from the others that deal with depression, which mimics the feeling of isolation people facing depression must feel. Also, the italicized *lucky* juxtaposes the two experiences. Many "lucky" individuals don't even understand depression, let alone know firsthand how it truly affects an individual.

Comment [8]: This simile creates a horrific image, but is effective for those who haven't experienced depression. It also parallels the religious "American sin" reference our writer will use later.

Comment [9]: Anaphora - repetition of the beginning phrase further highlights what is lost when people struggle with mental illness. In fact, this whole section is set up as parallel structure - repetitive phrases (You lose / it doesn't) followed by a metaphor of a tunnel. This is a played out metaphor, but to compare suicide to "the light at the end of the tunnel" is turning it on its head a bit. It helps people rationalize why suicide is seen by some as their only option. Also, consider the syntax of these three "you" sentences. The first two are short and clear, while the final sentence grows in intensity along with the depression's impact.

Comment [10]: Ethos - Schroeder is speaking into this situation with authority because she has been there; this gives her credibility with her audience. She also shifts here from more general and hypothetical to very personal.

Comment [11]: This abrupt shift shows the contrast between our writer's outer life of extravagance and her inner turmoil.

Comment [12]: Mirrors back to the headline of the article. Really this is the crux of her argument.

I was at Step 1 in a three-step process: First, the all-consuming need to make the pain stop. Then, “Create a plan.” I don’t think I need to explain what happens next. When A. broke into my apartment, I reacted angrily. I pretended I was OK, that she was overreacting, that everything was fine.

The reality is that A. saved my life. She didn’t call 911 or pull me out of a bloody tub, but her actions woke me up. I had frightened her, which, in turn, frightened me. I called a psychiatrist the next day and went back on meds. Within a few weeks, I started to climb out of the chasm, chastened, a little humiliated — and very grateful.

Suicide is shocking to most of us, especially celebrity suicide. We trot out platitudes about having so much to live for, about the terrible waste. But I never feel shocked because I know that it is possible to play-act your way through life.

When we ask others how they are doing, we don’t really want to know. We prize individuality and privacy; more than that, we prize success. Despair and mental illness don’t square with success. The desperately unhappy feign wellness. They don’t want to admit to friends and family members that they have succumbed to the ultimate American sin of not being able to say, “I’m good.”

No doubt everyone who has posted an admonition to “Get help!,” every reporter who added the National Suicide Prevention 800 number at the end of a news story is well-intentioned. But as a person who has called that hotline, I can tell you: It isn’t enough.

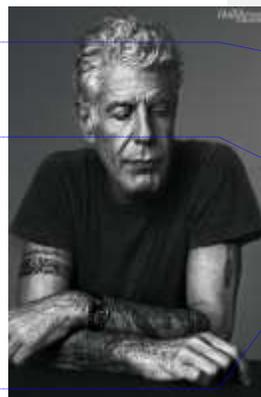
Hotlines are a start — but you can and should do a lot more. If you fear that someone in your life is depressed, make that call yourself. Then make more calls. Get resources lined up — real resources, like therapists and psychiatrists willing to work on a sliding scale. More importantly, be willing to intrude.

Commit another American sin: Ask someone how they really are. Keep phoning. Invade personal space. If you are genuinely afraid of what someone might do, take that someone to the emergency room or call 911. A depressed person may well resist your efforts — ignore her protests. Sick people need help, and they are often unwilling to admit it. But they won’t get better on their own.

It’s very possible that the only reason I am here today is because of my friend and her crowbar. Don’t be afraid to use a crowbar. More crucially, don’t be afraid.

Poet Amy Newlove Schroeder teaches writing and ethics at USC.

Photos above of Spade and Bourdain are printed with permission by the LA Times.



Comment [13]: Graphic imagery here reminds the audience what could have been if no one paid attention or came to check on her. The shock factor is meant to call people to action. This is what's at stake if you don't intervene.

Comment [14]: Another metaphor for people to understand the depths of depression for those who haven't been through it.

Comment [15]: Mirrors back to her first paragraph about being able to feign happiness.

Comment [16]: Interesting way to phrase this. It is almost sacrilegious in America to not be fine when people ask. That just shows how far we need to go to destigmatize mental health and how we all need to be more honest with those around us when we are struggling.

Comment [17]: She doesn't want to alienate those who have posted these phrases recently, so she acknowledges that she understands these comments often come out of a place of love.

Comment [18]: This is really her thesis. There is more we can all do than post simple platitudes online and go about our day.

Comment [19]: This is also the crux of her argument. We have to be willing to do what's necessary for those who need help, even if they don't like us for those actions.

Comment [20]: Great use of sarcasm and juxtaposition to her earlier point - the real sin is not genuinely investing in people; we need to actually encourage a more complex answer than "I'm fine."

Comment [21]: Very tangible and concrete examples of what can be done to help. This helps the audience feel less overwhelmed about where to go from here. This is her call to action.

Comment [22]: Crowbar ties back to the personal anecdote and reiterates the call the action. We cannot be fearful of how others might view us. We must fearlessly go forward to help others.

Comment [23]: These two particular photos are interesting choices. Kate Spade is surrounded by light and her literal success in this image, but that money and celebrity still wasn't able to make her happy or fulfill her. Contrastingly, Anthony Bourdain is consumed in shadow; in this photo he looks pensive, isolated, and burdened. It's almost as if he is crying for someone to ask how is REALLY is.

Take-aways from these images: Depression doesn't discriminate, and there are always signs that someone is hurting.

Rhetorical Précis Sample:

In her op-ed piece “Posting a hotline number isn't enough; Break down doors to prevent a suicide” published in the *LA Times* (2018), poet and USC professor Amy Newlove Schroeder contends that when it comes to suicide prevention, “hotlines are a start — but [we] can and should do a lot more” for the people around us battling depression “who are often unwilling to admit it.” Schroeder bolsters this claim by alluding to current events and cultural norms to show how pervasive the issue of mental health is (“thoughts and prayers,” Chris Cornell, Chester Bennington), by sharing her personal experience with depression to establish her credibility on the subject matter (“I should know. I have suffered from depression since I was a kid.”), and by divulging the dark side of depression through her use of shocking figurative language (“It is like demonic possession.”). In response to the recent string of Hollywood suicides and the proverbial “if you need something, call me” line that many are posting on social media pages these days, Schroeder is advocating for more aggressive—and yes, intrusive—action from her audience in order to potentially save lives. This article is so wide-reaching because all of us are sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, friends or neighbors, co-workers or acquaintances; Schroeder’s poignant yet commanding tone is meant to inspire the audience to pay a little closer attention to the needs of others, as well as embolden us to “[not] be afraid” to do battle with this enemy of depression when those we love are being consumed by its unyielding and indiscriminate impact.