

# Too Young to Die – An Asian Perspective on Youth Suicide

**Author: B L Chia; Publisher: Times Books International 1999; Pages: 161 (14 Chapters with References and Index)**

This is a book written by Singapore's first private psychiatrist who completed his MD thesis on suicide in 1980. The book is divided into 14 chapters which describes the concept of suicide, the motivations for suicide, statistics about suicide as well as how to assess and hopefully prevent suicide. Dr Chia sees suicide as an age-old practice and dispels misconceptions that no suicide exists in the past. In looking through his cases, he discovers that suicide motives are essentially the same; revenge, a desire to reunite with a departed one, escape from pain, punishment or dishonour.

The source of Dr Chia's material is obtained through a 6-year study of coroner's case files, a psychological post-mortem on 54 young suicides through interviewing family members, 86 suicide letters and 25 suicides among his 1275 patients over the years. This is an impressive number of cases bearing in mind that often less than 20 persons under the age of 19 commit suicide in Singapore every year.

Throughout the book, Dr Chia emphasises that suicide is personal and that suicide in the young results in great horror and disbelief for both the family members as well as society. The tragedy is even greater in the examples of suicide letters which are liberally used throughout the book.

## Comparison with other local books

I have read only 2 other books on suicide in Singapore. *Suicidal behaviour in the Asia Pacific Region*<sup>(1)</sup> is a compilation of short essays written by eminent suicidologists from the Asia Pacific region. The section on suicide in Singapore is written by Dr Kok Lee Peng. The 23-page chapter covers quite a lot of ground in discussing demographic profiles of suicides, causes as well as methodology of suicide. There is a section on attempted suicide as well. As a summary of suicide statistics and discussion, this would make a good read for those looking for a quick overview of suicides in Singapore. *Giving up hope: A study of attempted suicide amongst Indian Women*<sup>(2)</sup> is written by an Indian academic and is based on a qualitative study of 25 Indian women who attempted suicide. Essentially, the book looked at cultural factors facing suicidal Indian women such as increased risks among those who repeatedly

attempt suicide and married women who have difficulties with their husbands. There has been no books looking at the young, so Dr Chia's book fills an obvious vacuum.

## Highlights

The book employs language that is generally simple to read, clear and not too technical. The size is manageable with just over 150 pages. It took me just over a weekend to go through. The use of suicide letters to illustrate or highlight gives the book authenticity. That these were direct translations serve to leave the reader with a real sense of what went on. The huge numbers surveyed also lends credence to the book. Dr Chia was also creative in coming up with suicide risk ratios based on 1,275 cases from his case files. All psychiatrists are aware that there is suicidal risk in schizophrenia and mood disorders, but how many of us are aware that the risk ratio in schizophrenia is 28:1 whereas neurosis has a risk ratio of 130:1? The chapter on assessment is perhaps the most useful, practical and important, as it presents a simple protocol with basic risk factors for all to use. The warning signs will be invaluable for all to use. I particularly like Dr Chia's suggestion that architects redesign HDB flats to make them more suicide proof. I also enjoyed the short but succinct section on therapy for suicidal young as it captures the essential elements that a therapist would go through in handling a young person on the verge of suicide. Dr Chia recognises the perpetual dilemma of "the therapist being torn between sympathy for the young's despair and recognition of a realistic need for limit setting, knowing that either course may lead to a suicidal act". I found it personally useful in dealing with numerous suicidal cases that I see.

## Criticisms

The book could have been organised into more logical sequences. It could have started with a profile of suicides (including statistics, attempted suicides, ethnic differences as well as methods of suicides. The causes of suicide can be placed in a chapter on understanding suicide, which can also include suicide letters and assessment. The main limitation of Dr Chia's book is that the information

may be out-of-date. It is now 20 years since his study with tremendous socio-demographic changes in Singapore. The reasons might therefore have changed. Dr Chia feels that as very young suicides are rare, there may be no need to look at this group. However, with the lowering of the age of puberty, more suicides under 14 may occur. Dr Chia's psychological postmortem is based on interviewing the families of suicide victims, but in studying adolescents and young adults, interviews with their friends and teachers may yield more intimate details that family members may not be aware of.

### **Conclusion**

Books relevant to psychiatry and children's mental health are few and far between in Singapore. Much has been written about suicide in the West but less in Asia. This is a welcome addition that tries to cater to the lay public, yet maintaining enough professional stance to capture the interest of professionals dealing with children, adolescents and young adults. I particularly like the chapter on how to assess suicide as it is a useful point for all to

know and it demystifies what essential knowledge is. Suicide risk assessment is a vital skill for all who come into contact with suicidal individuals. The chapter on prevention is equally succinct and generally superb. Using suicide letters to highlight causative factors is innovative and interesting. Dr Chia's aims in writing the book were to help the reader understand why young people commit suicide, improve skills in evaluating suicide risk and preventing suicides. Thus, this book accomplishes with much to spare.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Kok LP, Tseng WS eds. Suicidal Behaviour in the Asia Pacific Region. Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1992.
2. Mehta K. Giving up hope: A study of attempted suicide amongst Indian women. Singapore: Times Books International 1990.

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