Why People Die by Suicide

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The interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010) focus on three factors that mark individuals most at risk of death: feeling that one is a burden on loved ones; feeling isolated; and, perhaps most chillingly, the learned ability to hurt oneself. The theory is compatible with diverse facts taken from clinical anecdotes, human history, literary fiction, popular culture, anthropology, epidemiology, genetics, and neurobiology--facts concerning suicide rates of men and women; of White and African-American men; of anorexics, athletes, prostitutes, and physicians; and of members of cults, sports fans, and citizens of nations in crisis. Pointed empirical tests of the theory's claims have also been corroborative. In this lecture, I will present the theory, summarize and integrate relevant findings, and chart the future course for further development and tests of the theory.