



## Fact sheet 5

# Why do people take their own life?



### **Very often, family, friends and colleagues do not anticipate a suicide. If they do, they may not know what to do to prevent it.**

This fact sheet provides a brief summary of what is known about why people take their own life.

### **What we know about why people take their own life**

There are no simple or definitive explanations as to why people die by suicide. However, researchers have gathered information over time from people who have considered or attempted suicide, and from families and health professionals connected to people who have taken their own life.

This information indicates that there are many different reasons people suicide and often the reasons are not clear to others. The person's decision to suicide may be driven by a number of motives including:

- it may seem like the only way to escape intolerable emotional or physical pain or a sense of hopelessness;
- it may be an expression of ambivalence about living; and/or
- it may be a way of conveying a message. This could include symbolic gestures linked to the particular method or the location of suicide.

### **What may lead to suicide?**

For some people, suicide may be an impulsive and irrational act. For some it may be a carefully considered decision – particularly where the person believes that his or her death will benefit others. Some people take their own life or harm themselves apparently without warning. Some give an indication of suicidal intent, especially to friends and loved ones, but also to professionals. The most recent theories about the types of suicide and different motivations to suicide suggest that it may be due to one or a combination of the following:



## What may lead to suicide? (continued)

- a direct result of a mental illness, such as clinical depression or schizophrenia. However, many people with a mental illness are not affected by suicidal thoughts or behaviour, and not everyone who suicides is mentally disturbed or mentally ill;
- an outcome of reckless behaviour. Suicide is, for example, often associated with alcohol or other drugs, or it may result from dangerous or life-threatening activities;
- an attempt to end unmanageable pain. It may be psychological pain and despair, stemming from guilt, shame, or loss; or it may be chronic physical pain or debilitating illness;
- an attempt to send a message or gain a particular outcome such as notoriety, vengeance, defiance, or leave a particular legacy or aftermath;
- an altruistic or heroic act, relieving others of a burden, dying to save another, or dying for a cause; and/or
- an expression of the person's right to choose the manner of their death. In some circumstances, the specific means or place of suicide has particular symbolic significance to the person.

## More information

- The Healthy Place – contains a list of frequently asked questions about suicide and mental illness: [www.healthyplace.com](http://www.healthyplace.com)
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – A Framework for Prevention of Suicide in Australia* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- *Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) – Research and Evidence in Suicide Prevention* (2007). Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing: Canberra.
- Mental health & well being – information on the Australian Government's role and contributions to mental health reform activities in Australia: [www.mentalhealth.gov.au](http://www.mentalhealth.gov.au)
- The Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention (WA) – suicide prevention information for professionals, researchers and community members: [www.mcsp.org.au](http://www.mcsp.org.au)
- Onyourmind.net – provides information and support for teens: [www.onyourmind.net](http://www.onyourmind.net)
- SANE Helpline – offers a wide range of information on mental illness and suicide prevention: Ph: 1800 18 SANE (7236); [www.sane.org](http://www.sane.org)