

SOME FEATURES OF ATTEMPTED SUICIDE IN
SRI LANKA

Chamindra Weerackody

Suicidal behaviour is viewed as a "coping mechanism used to deal with stress and undesirable life situations. From the perspective of the individual, it is a purposeful and meaningful response to a crisis situation in life.

A rapid increase in the incidence of 'suicide' has occurred in Sri Lanka since the 1950s. In 1984, 6609 cases of suicides were reported, which was 13 times higher than what was reported in 1950. No one has so far tried to investigate or assess the incidence of 'suicidal attempts' in Sri Lanka. There seems to be a consensus, however, in the west that there are approximately ten attempts for every successful suicide. Both suicides and suicidal attempts in Sri Lanka are numerous among teen-agers and young adults.

This paper discusses some of the important social and psychological characteristics associated with suicide attempters who had been admitted to the Kandy General Hospital. The data are derived through interviews conducted with suicidal attempters and their family members. In addition, three standard psychological scales were used to measure the levels of depression, loneliness and hopelessness experienced by the attempters. The respondents were in the age group 15-30 years and consisted of males and females.

88 percent of the attempters committed the act with the motive of destroying themselves while the rest had the intention of threatening or manipulating the significant other individuals.

The study attempts to show that suicidal behaviour is likely to occur when there is increased stress accompanied by hostility from family and significant others, when the other person is unable to retaliate and when he perceives that external help is either unavoidable or withdrawn from him and death is the only solution to what appears to him as an intolerable situation. The feelings of depression, hopelessness, loneliness or lack of social support and shame function as precipitating factors in suicidal attempts.

Most families view a suicidal attempt as a 'stupid' or a 'foolish' act and never consider it as having any long-term ramifications and implications. A number of discrepancies could be observed in understanding and interpreting acts of suicidal attempts by the victim and the family.

Suicide attempts place a heavy strain on the health care system, a system that already suffers from a very limited capacity. It is a burden on the family too. However, due to inadequate medical facilities, families of the victims have to bear the responsibility of providing after-care for their members who have attempted to end their lives.