

Opinion No one knows what to say when I share I tried to kill myself. That's okay.

By Sonia Weiser

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If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-TALK (8255) or visit suicidepreventionlifeline.org. You can also text a crisis counselor by messaging the Crisis Text Line at 741741.

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Listen to Sonia Weiser read her essay, produced by Julie Dejenbrock.

A year ago, I tried to kill myself.

No one knows how to respond when I tell them about that part of my past. It's okay. That might feel abnormal in our culture of nonstop communication, when there's always *something* to be said, whether it's via voice or text or meme or gif or emoji. But even with all of our modern forms of messaging, there is still no foolproof response.

As unnatural as it might be, you're allowed to say that you don't know what to say. I can't figure it out, either.

Every culture has a playbook for mourning. In Judaism, we sit shiva for seven days. We gather. We pray. There are bagels. We honor the memory of our loved ones with stories, photos and fruit salad on disposable plates. We know death is inevitable, so we write a script and preemptively buy a stack of 20 sympathy cards for \$7.99 at Marshalls.

Even death by suicide has a set of prewritten responses. In cultures where it's not viewed as a sin or a crime, we append the old standbys with "I hope they're in a better place" or "I hope they've found peace."

With a suicide attempt, there's no script. There's not even an outline.

Because what is there to say after you have attempted to take your own life, landed in the hospital, then gone right back to where you started, sending emails from the backseat of your parents' car as they drive you to your apartment in Brooklyn, apologizing for missing a deadline, telling your client you'll finish it that afternoon as soon as you

return from a “family emergency.” How do you explain to someone that suicidal ideation isn’t something that goes away after a single attempt? That every week, its intensity might fluctuate between a dash of “what if” and an incessant bullying that leaves every other thought cowering in the corner. How do I explain the panic I feel when I consider that these thoughts might never fully go away?

And how are others expected to understand?

The Sunday after my own attempt, I emailed the couple thousand subscribers to my job-opportunity newsletter, explaining why they didn’t receive their usual Thursday edition. The note included a brief recap of the situation, and a list of intentions for work/life balance going forward.

Dozens of readers replied. Some emailers expressed gratitude I was still alive. Others praised my work. A few included detailed accounts of their own encounters with suicide, as though by sharing mine, I had granted them permission to finally do the same. They told me I was in their thoughts, that I got this, that I couldn’t let the bastards get me down. Some sent money; one told me I was whiny. I responded to as many as I could before I was depleted.

I appreciated the gestures, but I didn’t know what to write back. How do I reply to “glad you’re still alive” when my own brain barrages me with constant cruelty and drove me to try to take my life in the first place? Thank you, but I cannot accept this kindness.

And how do I advise someone who comes to me with their own stories of suicidal ideation and asks for help, expecting me to have not only the answers and expertise to steer them off a ledge, but also the emotional bandwidth to share that wisdom? What is there to say to someone else who, in the interest of wanting me to feel less alone, made my own attempt look pitiful in comparison? People close to them had died, or they themselves had attempted suicide more than once or with more extreme consequences. Just as they had felt obligated to say something to me, I felt compelled to say something in return.

So I consulted the same faulty guidebooks. May their memory be a blessing. I’m so sorry you went through that. I asked whether they were seeing a therapist, or had been in treatment and were “doing okay.” I was ill-equipped to deal with their pain, yet afraid to admit I was tongue-tied. Because despite there being nearly 1.2 million suicide attempts in the United States per year — 25 times the number of actual deaths — it’s a form of trauma that is deeply individual and isolating. Suicide carries an illusion of agency, and when presented in the context of a life otherwise devoid of tragedy, it can be completely incomprehensible.

Even to those of us who have tried. Especially to those who haven’t.

Maybe there’s someone out there who can relate. Maybe there’s something perfect to be said. I haven’t heard it yet. I certainly haven’t said it.

But perhaps the reason there is no response rulebook for a suicide attempt is there’s no good response, other than maybe to sit and listen and admit when you don’t know what to say at all.