Book Review

When It Is Darkest: Why People Die by Suicide and What We Can Do to Prevent It

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Rory O'Connor (2021)

When it is Darkest: Why People Die by Suicide and What We Can Do to Prevent It
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For some time, suicidal behavior has widely been regarded a by-product of depression or other psychiatric disorders. It was largely seen as the domain of psychiatrists and not studied or treated on its own. The last two decades have seen an increasing interest in the psychology of suicidal behavior, with a focus on the relationship between suicidal behavior and psychological risk factors such as hopelessness, entrapment, and rumination. From a health psychology perspective, suicidal behavior is conceptualized as actual conscious behavior, not merely as the residue of psychopathology.

A leading figure in this development has been Prof. Rory O'Connor, Director of the Suicidal Behaviour Research Lab at the University of Glasgow, UK. Prof. O'Connor and his team have been conducting a wide range of experimental and observational studies to better understand the psychology of suicidal behavior, inspiring many other researchers to follow suit. Importantly, Prof. O'Connor developed the integrated motivational volitional model of suicidal behavior, an extensive but intuitive model to understand suicidal behavior as the result of the interaction of different psychological risk factors. This model serves as the backbone of many scientific studies and clinical interventions, not only in the United Kingdom, but all around the globe.

As well as being a leading scientist, Prof. O'Connor is a great communicator, someone with a relentless drive and

energy to engage with professionals, people with lived experience of suicide, their loved ones, and anybody else with an interest in the topic of suicide. He has become a prominent media personality, always giving 100% to get the message across that we should all talk about suicide, so that no one has to feel alone with their suicidal thoughts any longer.

It is therefore a logical step for Prof. O'Connor to write a popular science book on the topic he has spent two decades researching. At the beginning of May 2021, his book "When It Is Darkest" was released by Vermillion, which is part of the renowned Penguin Random House group. I expected to read a well written book that would provide an overview of the state-of-the-art research with clear directions for the future, but this book has even more to offer than that. Prof. O'Connor has been able to weave his scientific message with a highly personal account of his journey, both as a researcher and as a human being. This combination of highly personal reflections combined with recent scientific insights makes the book stand out from many other popular psychology books.

The book is both wise and warm, intelligent and touching. It starts with a confession by the author about his own mental vulnerabilities. Prof. O'Connor states that he is "psychologically thin skinned," which makes him prone to intense rumination and feelings of guilt. Given his international reputation as a tireless, always positive and

extroverted person, this is a very brave start to the book. By being so open, Prof. O'Connor demonstrates that sharing one's own personal vulnerabilities is important and possible for everybody, even a successful professor. By setting this example, he shows it is okay to be vulnerable and to ask for (professional) help. This will serve both as a comfort and as an inspiration for others, as it did for me.

Prof. O'Connor writes how his own thinking about suicidal behavior has developed over the years by describing several cases and using quotes from the suicidal patients and bereaved family members whom he has spoken with at different points in his career. For me, this is the most exciting part of the book. You get to sit front row during the journey of a young psychology undergraduate who, via many touching encounters with patients, bereaved people, clinicians, and scientists, will end up being one of the leading professors in suicidology. You see the long road travelled, the development of ideas, and the effect his ideas ultimately will have on the scientific, professional, and lived experience community.

The book aims not only to make people understand, but to also feel the pain suicidal individuals experience. Prof. O'Connor does not present suicidal behavior as the rare behavior of sick people, but as something inherently human, making it something everybody can, at least to some extent, relate to. Pivotal is the story of Clare, a close friend whom he himself lost through suicide. By being so upfront about his own feelings of guilt surrounding the death of his friend, he shows that even professors

in suicide prevention can still be caught off guard by suicidal behavior.

The book offers much concrete advice, such as how to discuss suicidal behavior, or how to make a safety plan for someone who is in a suicidal crisis. It offers a comprehensive overview of where we stand in the field of suicide prevention. It references evidence-based interventions, noting that often their immediate-term effects are small and their long-term effects are unknown. Prof. O'Connor points out that we still know little about how to best support those bereaved by suicide, and that significant others also need to look after themselves while they are looking out for their suicidal partner, family member, or friend.

In the end, Prof. O'Connor's message is that communication is key. Empathic listening will help build trust and collaboration. People will only open up and dare to be vulnerable if you are able to make a real connection with them. With this book, Prof. O'Connor makes a real connection with the reader, demonstrating why he is such a highly regarded expert. He knows how to empathically communicate about such a sensitive topic, inspiring others to do the same.

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