Suicide: Why?

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November 6, 2026

If you're thinking about suicide, you can call or text 988 in the US and Canada, or find a helpline in your country at findahelpline.com

I am 10 years old. My parents sit my thirteen-year-old sister and me down in the living room and tell us that we will never see one of our aunts again. I don't remember the exact words my parents used but they were to the effect of "*sometimes you can die because of yourself*". My parents had probably forgotten but I already understand what suicide is from watching 3 Idiots a year ago in 2009. Joy Lobo hanging from the ceiling with "I QUIT" written on the wall is not a scene a 10-year-old can forget. I cannot imagine it being easy for a parent to have to explain death to a 10-year-old, let alone death by suicide. To their credit, they told us exactly "how" our aunt had passed away. But what stayed with me wasn't the "how". It was the "why". I didn't pursue it then but ever since, life has made me find an answer to this question.

At 15, I learned that one of my friends is no more. By then, I understood that everyone dies eventually. What I could not comprehend is why a 15-year-old like me would want to end it all. I start questioning people in his life. Making up reasons as to why he would do it. No reason would ever feel enough. I wanted somebody to blame and hold responsible. Since this friend lived in a different country I don't think I ever told my parents how they died. I do remember asking my mother to film me releasing heart-shaped balloons for a tribute video. I would dream of the time we spent together only to wake up to a vision of how they must have ended it all. I do not know, nor do I wish to know how they did it. I really wanted to know why.

At 19, my now ex-girlfriend is not responding to any of my texts or calls and has locked herself in her room. I panic and let the first person I see know what is happening. This person ends up informing someone with authority, they call 911 and break into her room. They do not let me enter but I find out that she had climbed the building roof from her window and was contemplating jumping off it. They stop her. I am not allowed to see her for the next 7 hours. I am extremely grateful to the three friends that were with me for those hours. They saw me go through a range of emotions and even as 19-year-olds held me through them like some seasoned veterans. I feel like I have never been able to appropriately thank them for what they did for me that day. Anger, crying, vomiting, grief, despair, guilt, relief. Those seven hours were something. I wish I was in a position to document this sooner. The feelings seem like a distant past and my brain has

tried very hard to block them out. For years I was unable to revisit this incident. It took me two years to tell anyone outside those three friends about this incident.
When she returned, I did not have it in me to have the conversation. So, we never did. I just tried to fill the gaps as to why she would want to do it. More honestly, I tried to make sure it wasn't about me. Selfish, I know. To this day I only have a broad general idea as to "why" she wanted to. As a partner it was not an easy thing to go through. There are multiple layers. First, you question, how bad am I that she'd want to kill herself? Second, well how do I ensure I do not trigger this in her in the future? Third, what would have happened to me had she died? As I believe years later, these were all unimportant questions. They all focussed on me. Her decision probably had very little to do with me. After a lot of reflection, pondering and trying to play out every scenario, I know one thing: there is not a single reason for the "why" that would have worked for me. I was incapable of accepting whatever she told me. I would constantly try to fix/solve the reason/problem. Maybe it was the rational computer scientist in me that always needed to fix the "bug". Maybe as a person that has never been in the neighbourhood of depression, it was just beyond my imagination as to why someone would choose to live in that state and not just be happy instead. I now understand the privilege of that - of even thinking of it as a choice. Irrespective of the "why", I simply did not have the tools to help her and the kind of professional help that is needed is rarely ever going to come from a partner.

At 24, an extremely close friend told me how they had almost taken their life at 20. I knew them at 20. I was close to them at 20. I had no idea. I haven't told this to my friend but the night when they told me, something fundamentally shifted in me. If someone so close to me was going through something so drastic and I was oblivious to it, I wonder what people around me are going through at any given time and not letting on. This is not something new. We have all been taught to have baseline empathy and kindness towards anyone for this very reason. I seldom practiced it. This was a slap in the face to re-evaluate my ways. But I was still focused on the "why". Again, lacked courage to ask friend point blank, "why?"

I happened to undergo suicide prevention training at 21 through a job I had at the time. The approach was surprisingly direct: if you think someone is in distress, ask them plainly if they are thinking about suicide. If they are, listen long enough to get them to professional help. When I eventually had to use this only once in real life, I was surprised by how straightforward it felt. I didn't search for reasons. I didn't try to fix anything. For the first time, the why didn't matter.

I had been chasing the answer to why. Now, I think my answer is: irrelevance. Not because the why doesn't exist, or doesn't matter at all, but because in the moments

when it matters most, it isn't something you can access, articulate, or resolve in time. Even if you could, it's rarely something another person can fix. The immediate reality is simpler and harder: someone wants to end their life. And in that moment, the priority isn't understanding. It's presence. It's time. It's intervention. That doesn't make the why meaningless. Understanding patterns and causes matters at a broader level. But in the moments that matter most, it is often less actionable than we think. However, preventing someone from jumping is one challenge. Eradicating the want to jump in the first place is another entirely.

I don't want to be preachy and nor do I possess the qualifications to suggest what we as society can do. But I have wanted to do something about this for a long time. I am not naive nor optimistic enough to think that I am going to be able to solve suicide. And being there for people is a finite resource I cannot promise to extend to every person in my life. However, I do believe that community building and de-isolation are a step in the right direction. We're in our heads 24x7 anyways. So, for the past two years, I've thought about doing this: a weekly one-hour open Zoom call. No agenda. No pressure. No expectations. You don't have to come if you're sad. You don't have to come if you're happy. You don't have to come at all. But if you do, it's just a space to talk, listen, joke, exchange ideas, do quizzes, read books, complete work or exist quietly. I'll be there every week (for now, at least the next six months), on Saturdays from 11:00am–12:00pm ET (link).

PS - If we haven't spoken in a while and you want to; this is the perfect place. Not me treating this like office hours for life ☺.