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Book Review of David Lester, *Making Sense of Suicide: An In-depth Look at Why People Kill Themselves* (The Charles Press 1997)

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Erratum

The citation for this review is *8 RISK 299 (1997)* in most commercial databases.

David Lester, *Making Sense of Suicide: An In-depth Look at Why People Kill Themselves* (The Charles Press 1997). Preface, bibliographical references, index. ISBN 0-914783-82-3. [208 pp. Paper \$22.95. P.O. Box 15715, Philadelphia, PA 19103.]

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for 15–24 year-old U.S. citizens. It is the eighth foremost cause of death for all ages, ending the lives of 30,000 people in this country each year. In the past fifteen years, the suicide rate increased an alarming 358% for young African American males. Both appalled and fascinated by the topic that permeates our society, people seek information: Why do people kill themselves? Who is most at risk? What are the warning signs?

Making Sense of Suicide promises a thorough overview of all aspects of all kinds of suicidal behavior and examines a wide range of topics, e.g., the definition of suicide, difficulties in research, possible causes, risk categories, signs of persons in jeopardy and possible interventions. Dr. Lester's book also separates myths from facts and discusses many popular beliefs:¹

...suicide is often described with statements such as "suicide strikes 30,000 people in the course of a year," or "suicide is the third most common killer of young people." The implications of these descriptions are misleading. Suicide does not "strike" in the sense that measles and tuberculosis strike. Suicide is the result of a gradual process that unfolds within an individual; it is not the work of a mysterious external agency. The Suicide "strikes" idea relieves people of the idea that others can sometimes be responsible for a person's suicide. It implies that suicide cannot be predicted and prevented, that people who commit suicide are incomprehensibly struck with the need or desire to kill themselves. We know that this is not true....

Lester, a Professor of psychology who has devoted a considerable part of his career to the study of suicide and homicide, examines various suicide-associated factors such as drugs, alcohol, mental illness and depression. He also presents other possibly associated factors such as heredity, environment, gender, weather, personality, childhood experiences, social factors and time of the year.

¹ At 2.

On the possibility of physique as a cause, Lester writes:²

Some studies have examined the possible relationship between a person's weight and suicide. In general, it appears that underweight or overweight people are more likely to kill themselves than people of normal weight.

We must remember, when thinking about physique and suicide, that causality need not work in only one direction. People who become suicidal may have changes in physique due to their mood. They may change their dietary habits and become overweight or underweight because of their obsession with suicide.

Making Sense of Suicide is well organized. Easily read in a few hours, its relatively short twenty chapters do not provide the "in-depth" treatment claimed by the subtitle. Rather, it seems more an introduction. Yet, extensive references to prominent authorities, a comprehensive index and generous use of statistics makes it a good starting point for research by, e.g., students in psychology, sociology or any mental health field. Dr. Lester presents the information in a "teaching" style that is easy to read and understand, with short sentences and paragraphs. Examples add to its interest and enhance understanding. It offers an excellent quick reference for health workers, teachers, crisis workers, police officers, prison workers, social workers, parents and other dealing with people possibly at risk.

I would recommend this book for acquisition by public and college libraries, and for reading by anyone with an interest in the topic.

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² At 31-32.

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