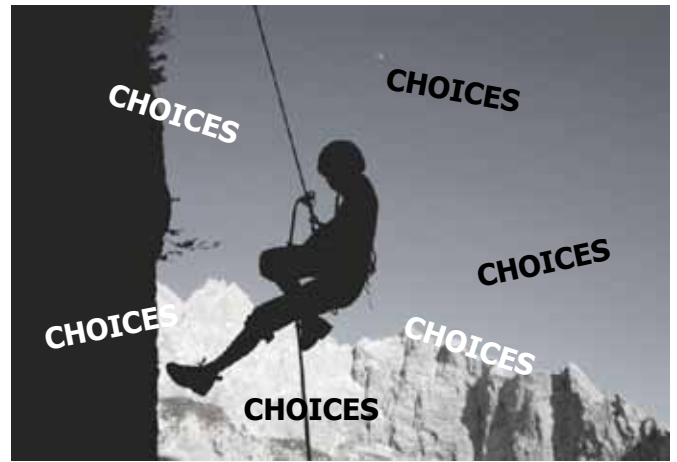


# CHOOSE LIFE

## Saying No to Suicide

by J. David Hertzler



**“Choose life,”** the ancient leader Moses told his people.

*“I have set before you life and death...Now choose life, so that you and your children may live,”* he said.

Today young people in increasing numbers are choosing death. The suicide rate among Canadians under 24 has climbed faster than for any other age group over the past two decades. The rate for Native people is as much as ten times that of non-natives.

Not included in these statistics are those who eat, drink or starve themselves to death or die in alcohol-related accidents.

If life is a choice, why do so many young people choose death by suicide?

There are many reasons. One boy explains his reasons in this suicide tape he left behind.

*“I’ll tell you one thing, you really get messed up on that stuff. I didn’t think it was when I was first taking them, but I’ve been getting pretty stoned lately and you just don’t know what is real and what isn’t real...It’s hard to distinguish between right and wrong. I know...I’m gonna be suffering eternally for this, but life seems too long to wait. All I’m doing is existing. There really isn’t anything to live for.”*

Do you see the tug-of-war going on inside this boy? Right vs. Wrong. Truth vs. The Lie. Mind vs. Feelings. Hope vs. Despair. **Life vs. Death.**

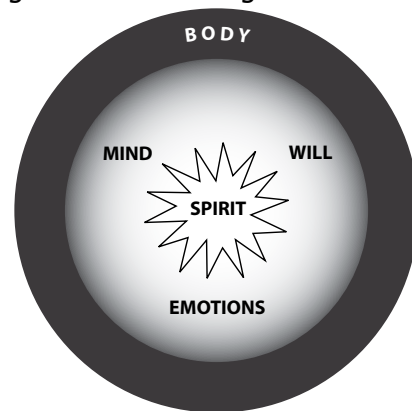
You have felt this tug-of-war. It goes on inside everybody. Sometimes Life wins, sometimes Death.

How can you tip the balance in favour of Life? This happens deep inside, where the Real You lives.

### THE REAL YOU

Everybody knows that the Real You is not the colour of your skin. It’s not the shape or size or strength of your body. It’s not how smart you are. It’s not how you dress. These things make no difference in choosing life or death.

The Real You is inside. You can’t see it. But if you could, it might look something like this:



As a human being you are both physical and spiritual. Like other living things, you have a physical body that needs food and water and oxygen to stay alive. Like your Creator, you also have a spirit that can communicate with its Creator.

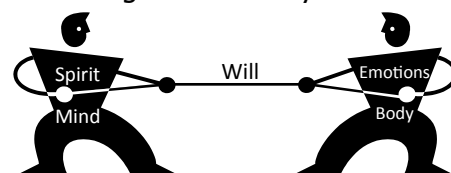
As long as your spirit lives in your body, you have three other abilities that most living things do not have:

**Mind** - the ability to think, reason, learn and form beliefs at a very high level;

**Will** - the ability to choose and make decisions;

**Emotions** - the ability to feel deeply about both physical and spiritual things.

Your physical nature and your spiritual nature are in constant tension. There is conflict between the desires of the spirit and the desires of the body. This conflict is at the root of the tug-of-war that you feel sometimes.



Your mind, will and emotions also take sides in this battle. Most of time the mind sides with the spirit and the emotions with the body. The will—well, it gets caught in between, sometimes going one way, sometimes the other.

Remember the boy who made the suicide tape. He had been taking drugs for some time. Can you imagine what his mind and emotions might have been saying the first time he took drugs?

*Mind:* It's wrong. (conscience)

*Emotions:* But they'll laugh at me if I don't (shame).

*Mind:* You could get hooked. (reason)

*Emotions:* So what! I'm bored. I need some adventure (boredom).

*Mind:* What if you get caught? What will your parents think? (consideration)

*Emotions:* If I'm stoned, I won't care. It will hurt them worse than it hurts me (anger).

*Mind:* There's no happiness in drugs. (experience)

*Emotions:* But I'll have lots of company (loneliness).

On and on the tug-of-war goes. Finally this boy's emotions pulled his mind across the line. Pretty soon his mind was agreeing with his emotions. He did only what felt good. **In the end nothing felt good and he decided there was nothing left to live for.**

But that doesn't happen to everybody. Sometimes the mind and spirit stand their ground and keep the body and emotions in check.

Not everything the body and emotions desire is wrong. If you haven't eaten for many hours, your stomach sends out hunger pangs. Your emotions may be restless until you choose the food your body needs. That's a good choice. However, you wouldn't want to let your body and emotions dictate **all** your choices.

In the same way, not everything your mind thinks is right. You may sincerely believe that the river you are canoeing will lead you home. But if it is the wrong river, you may never get home. Your mind can store up both right and wrong ideas and beliefs. Nevertheless, it is usually safer to trust your mind than to trust your emotions.

### **"I'D NEVER DO THAT."**

Probably every suicide victim has said that at least once. Probably you have said it too. Still, many young people go "over the edge." Their minds gradually lose their grip. They are overpowered in the tug-of-war of life.

Most young people who attempt suicide do so for one of two reasons: 1) they get tricked into playing what seems like a dangerous and exciting game, or 2) they are so full of pain and despair that they give up on life.

Life on earth carries a price tag of pain. Painful things happen to everybody. For most people the price is not too high. They are willing to choose life and the pain that goes with it.

But some life experiences produce more pain than others. Here is a list of very painful experiences. One study has found that these experiences are common among young people who attempt suicide. Check the experiences you have had.

### **List 1**

- \_\_\_ Loss of a parent or caretaker, either through desertion, divorce or death.
- \_\_\_ No significant person or intimate friend in your age group.
- \_\_\_ No one at all to whom you can get really close.
- \_\_\_ Someone in your home drinks too much alcohol.
- \_\_\_ Verbal, physical or sexual abuse.
- \_\_\_ Lots of "put downs" from members of your family or from other races.
- \_\_\_ Lots of isolation and loneliness.
- \_\_\_ Lots of conflict with parents, especially father.
- \_\_\_ Conflicts between parents: dad and mom don't get along.
- \_\_\_ Loss of health, best friend, or other prized possession.



*"When my son was growing up I never really told him I loved him or that I cared for him. I basically left him to find out things for himself and to learn from those experiences. I wish now that I could have been able to tell him what was right and wrong and what he should be doing to make sure he didn't get into trouble. I think the way I brought up my children was learned through my parents who did not tell us what they felt for us or what they thought we should be doing as children and how to make the right decisions. There was very little guidance. I think that's where a lot of parents went wrong and we are seeing some of those effects now with the number of suicides happening."*

—Mother of a teen suicide victim

Here is a list from another study. This is called Some Reasons Why Youth Commit Suicide. Check the ones that are true for you.

### List 2

- Anger and bitterness.
- Feelings of hopelessness about yourself, your life and future.
- Trying to control or manipulate other people.
- Seeking revenge against someone who hurt you.
- Belief that everyone experiences bliss after death, or that there is no existence after death.
- Sexual abuse.
- Hero worship in which the hero glorifies suicide.
- Fear of spirits.
- Family problems and dysfunctions.
- Lack of love from father.
- Satanic influence from rock music or rock videos.
- Looking for escape from the pain of life.
- Self-punishment for guilt feelings.
- Physical illness.
- Regular consumption of drugs or alcohol.

The more items you checked on Lists 1 and 2, the higher your pain level is likely to be. You may feel strong enough now to rise above the pain. **But what happens if an unexpected tragedy or loss suddenly increases your pain? Is your source of strength large enough to balance it?**

Two items on this list bear special mention: drugs and rock music. Young people often use these to reduce the pain of life. Isn't that O.K.?

Think about it this way. If pain is the price tag of life, then avoiding or escaping pain means opting out of life. You can blow your mind and change your emotions with drugs and music so that you don't feel the pain. But as you do this, you move further from life and closer to death. The boy who left the suicide tape was a heavy user of both drugs and rock music. They may not have caused his death. But they dampened his desire and ability to deal with pain and to live.

### HOPE-BUILDERS

Let's do one more list. These are things that strengthen you and build hope. Check the ones you have.



### List 3

- Accurate information about right and wrong. The messages you listen to from outside yourself give you good information. You know for sure that suicide is wrong.
- A reliable person with whom you can share your secrets and be sure that nobody else will hear about them.
- A person who depends upon you and trusts you for something.
- A goal: something you are working on that is very important to you and the group you belong to, that you want to finish.
- A person who loves you unconditionally and will accept you no matter what.
- A group (team, church, club, etc.) to which you belong and in which you have an important part.
- Spiritual roots which give you satisfactory answers to your questions about God and yourself.
- Parents who show that they love each other and love you.
- Activities that you are good at, that are important to your family and community.

### OUT OF BALANCE? NOW WHAT?

Did you check as many items on List 3 as you did on List 1? Maybe you checked more. If you did, you may have good balance in your life.

If you checked a lot more items on List 1, does that mean you are suicidal? Not necessarily. It may just mean that you are out of balance.



Maybe you know the feeling. You're leaning over the edge of the boat to get something out of the water. Suddenly a little puff of wind comes along, and over you go. When you are out of balance, it doesn't

take much to push you "over the line."

*In one community many young people were under stress. Then one day one of them committed suicide. Within a week others had attempted suicide and several had succeeded. The extra stress was more than they could handle in their unbalanced condition.*

The teen years are a time of stress. Your body changes so fast that you don't always know what you'll see when you wake up the next morning. Your mind, will and emotions are changing, too.

That's why you have a special need for security and support systems when you are a teen. You need people around you who will catch you if you get seriously out of balance.

Look at List 3 again. Count the items that involve other people.

Write the number here. \_\_\_\_\_

Did you write the number seven? Good! In fact, you could say that all nine items on the list need people. If you have enough good people around you, you probably won't commit suicide.

*Dr. Don Bartlette was a Native boy who grew up in a poor, alcoholic family. Because he had a cleft palate and couldn't speak, he was abused by his family and neighbours. He was filled with rage and hatred for everybody around him. More than once he tried to kill himself or his father. Then one day a kind lady in town saw him and invited him to her house. She gave him a good meal and some new clothes. She gave him work that he could do and paid him for it. She began teaching him to speak. It took a long time, but finally her love broke down the walls around his heart. He began to love the same God she loved. He forgave his parents and learned to love them. He went to school and began to learn ways to help his people. Today he is a well-loved speaker who has inspired many of his people to walk the path of love. One lady made the difference in helping him to choose life.*

But what if you don't have a person like this in your life? Many teens say that they don't. They feel isolated and totally alone.

Of course you are not Aladdin. You can't call up a genie who will give you a faithful friend. However, there are things you can do to help yourself. Here are some, for starters.

1. **Take risks to find a true friend.** Don't give up in your search for a person who is wise, reliable and loving, who is not afraid to tell you the truth. This person may not live in your village or even in your province or country. It may need to be a pen-pal or "phone-pal." You might be surprised how many people are just like you, looking for a true friend. So prepare yourself to **be** a friend, not just to **find** one.

2. **Speak about your inner pain.** Start now by writing it in a journal. Maybe you can't share your feelings every day with a friend. But the journal is always ready to listen. And don't just write about your pain. Tell also about any good things that give you hope.

3. **Fill your mind with truth.** In this Information Age, how can you know for sure what is true? You can't always. But you have to start somewhere. For centuries many people have found that the truest book ever written is the Holy Bible. It's available almost everywhere and in almost every language. Start reading it. You won't understand everything at first, but understanding will come as you keep reading. When you get other information, compare it to what you read in the Bible. Learn to recognize what is true and what is false in the messages that come your way. Then speak the truth to those around you.

4. **Develop your skills.** You were born with natural talents. Ask several people who know you well to tell you what kind of work they would imagine you doing as an adult. If your school has aptitude tests or vocational preference tests available, ask permission to take them. Find out what your strengths and interests are. Then start building your skills in these areas.

5. **Learn to say "No."** It's much easier to say "Maybe" or "I don't know." It takes strength to say "No" to things that are wrong. Start small. Find two or three wrong things today to which you can say "No." Write these on a list that you carry in your pocket. Tomorrow add one or two things to the list. You'll probably make some enemies when you say "No" to things they want you to do. But you are building strength for better friendships in the future.

**6. Try to build bridges with your parents, especially your father.** This may also be risky, especially if your parents are abusive. You may want to have another friend firmly by your side before you try this. Start by admitting the wrong things you have done to them and seeking forgiveness. Keep your boundaries clear, and start the bridge from your side. They might not let you plant the bridge on their side, but you will gain strength from trying. And if you can complete the bridge, you will gain a valuable friend and ally.



**7. Learn to handle disappointment.** Not everything you try will work out as you hope. Disappointment will be painful. But remember, pain is a signal that you are alive! Dead bodies don't hurt. You can bear pain, with help from God and trusted friends. So don't deny it or deaden it or try to drown it out. Keep the wound clean until it heals.

**8. Learn to pray.** Don't try to make it fit a formula or pattern. Speak to God as you would to a friend. Use your own words to say exactly what is in your heart. Then listen with your heart. You may not hear anything with your ears. The answers God gives often come as feelings of peace, confidence and strength.

**9. Celebrate life!** Every day of life is a gift from your Creator. Celebrate it! Sing a song, write a poem, shout a shout, give a gift. Don't let a single day go by unrecognized or uncelebrated. Sure, it's full of pain. But thank God for it. Giving thanks is one of the first steps to making peace with God.

*In a classic story by John Bunyan, two travellers lost their way and were captured by a terrible giant named Despair. This giant put the travellers into a dungeon in his castle. There they stayed for many days without food or water. Every day the giant took them out and beat them. He showed them the bones of other travellers who had died in his castle. He told them to kill themselves, because*

*they would never get out. Overcome with pain, one traveller was about to do just that. The other encouraged him to hold on just a little longer. Suddenly the first traveller remembered a key he had been carrying. Its name was Promise, and it would open any door. They tried it in the lock of their dungeon. Sure enough, the door opened. The travellers escaped and went on their way.*

You too can arm yourself with strong promises from faithful persons. With these you can conquer pain and despair and keep hope alive.

Keep looking up. Choose life.

As you read this, you may still feel alone. But by reading this booklet, you have been listening to someone who wants to be your friend. We invite you to write or call us at the address below.

## ENDNOTES

1. Deuteronomy 30:19.
2. Used by permission of Gary Quequish.
3. From The Sioux Lookout Bulletin. April 7, 1993. Vol 2, No. 24, pg 11.
4. Adapted from *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan.

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