Can We Fix This?

"Here's to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers. The round pegs in the square holes. The ones who see things differently. They're not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About the only thing you can't do is ignore them. Because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do."

- Rob Siltanen

Before we can look at the reasons why people take their own lives and how to prevent this, we need to challenge a deeply held assumption that a lot of people have. As a society, many people do not believe we can do anything to stop people ending their lives by suicide. A lot of people believe that any form of suicide prevention is pointless. If we stop them doing it one way, they will just do it another way. Too many people believe that suicide is a problem that is always going to be there, and there's nothing that we can do about it.

This is a myth and a very dangerous one. I believe that before we can make any inroads with suicide prevention, we must wholeheartedly dismantle this myth.

Let's look at the facts.

There is a really interesting study that everyone in the field of suicide prevention should be aware of. The study is called "Where are they now?" a follow-up study of suicide attempters from the Golden Gate Bridge. It was published by Richard Seiden of the University of California at Berkeley.

Between 1937 and 1971, roughly 500 people were stopped from jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. The researchers followed up with them years later, and they found that 94% of them were either still alive or had died of natural causes. Someone might argue that these people were stopped therefore they weren't serious, I strongly disagree with this. If someone gets to the point where they are about to end their life, I can assure you they are serious.

This study strongly suggests that if we can help someone who is suicidal at the time of crisis, or ideally before they even get there, then they won't just do it another way; they will choose to live. In my life I have had contact with literally thousands of people who were suicidal, and the overwhelming majority found a way through, showing that suicide prevention is not pointless at all.

Let's look at a number of other fields where we have huge social problems. When we see the news, we hear that violent crime is getting worse, more people are dying from cancer, terrorism, and obesity. The world is in crisis and everything is getting worse, much worse. That's the message we often get told.

Let's look at the facts.

- Would you believe it if I told you in the last ten years childhood obesity rates have dropped by 43% in the United States?[10] It's true.
- In many countries, there has been a 50% drop in deaths by heart attacks in the last thirty years.[11]
- Deaths by cancer have dropped by 25% since 1991.[12]
- There has been a dramatic drop in the number of road deaths since the 1970s;[13] this is a trend in almost all Western countries.
- The odds of dying in a plane crash are ninety-nine percent less than 30 years ago.[14]
- In the late eighties and nineties, it was thought it was too late to do anything about the hole in the ozone layer, and the entire ozone layer would be gone in a few years. Some scientists predicted it would be gone by the year 2000! It is now expected to completely heal itself by 2050.[15]
- HIV was once a lethal disease; now we have medication that allows people with HIV to have a normal life expectancy.[16]
- Research suggests that rates of alcohol and drug use amongst teenagers have halved since the year 2000.[17]
- There has been a dramatic decrease in murder and violent crime rates since the 1960s.[18]
- Internationally child poverty has decreased by 50% in the last 30 years.[19]

I could probably fill a book with all the good news that is out there. I talk about this research in my workshops and many people are amazed because they often hear that everything is getting worse. A man who

came to one of my seminars doubted this; he thought I was making it up! He emailed me with an apology after he went home and Googled it! He was convinced that everything was getting worse.

Human beings can affect their environment and make things better.

There are many social problems that we've either already solved, or are well on the way to solving. However, there are two issues that have stubbornly not shown significant signs of improvement. These are the rising rate of mental illness and the number of people dying by suicide.[20] This has happened because either we don't know what to do or we believe there is nothing that can be done about it so we shouldn't even bother trying. I'm going to challenge this mindset for the rest of the book because I do believe that mental illness and suicide can be dramatically reduced.

How do we do this? One of the problems with the field of mental illness and suicide is that it is extraordinarily difficult to know where to start. There is no one cause of suicide, there isn't a magic formula that we can easily roll out. While many programs have shown some promise, no one program has solved the problem in its entirety. Maybe we can learn something from another industry: commercial flight. Many people think that planes are crashing all the time.

In the year 1985, it was estimated that roughly 3000 people died, worldwide, in commercial aviation accidents. Thirty years later in the year 2015, approximately 300 people died, worldwide, in aviation accidents. That sounds pretty impressive. There's one more impressive fact that you should know. In 2015, roughly three times as many people were flying as there were back in 1985. That's close to a 99% reduction in the death toll of aviation accidents, which is incredible.

So, what changed? Well, it came down to a philosophy or a way of thinking. As a society, we said that it is unacceptable to have so many people who die in plane crashes. We decided that the catastrophic loss of human life was not acceptable. We made a philosophical choice to do something about this, and in doing so we have made aviation incredibly safe, saving thousands of lives in the process.

How did we do that? There's not actually any one change that you can point to that made the aviation industry significantly safer. The way we solved the problem was by addressing multiple causes of aviation accidents.

Firstly, there were dramatic changes to the way pilots were trained and the way they interacted with each other in the cockpit; this is called crew resource management. There was also better training and management of air traffic controllers

- Scientists improved the detection of bad weather and there are now greater restrictions around what sort of weather pilots are allowed to fly into
- The next thing that played a big role was the design of aircraft. Aircraft are much more survivable now if a plane does crash
- We have taken steps to ensure that there are more regular inspections of aircraft so that faults are detected before disaster strikes
- There has been a significant improvement in preventing terrorism, from screening at airports to locked cockpit doors, to x-raying luggage
- There were many other factors as well, including identifying and addressing crew tiredness and sleep deprivation

Today, commercial flying is the safest means of transport we have. Your odds of being killed in a plane crash are about one in ten million.

In New Zealand, you would have to win Lotto three times to approach those odds!

We made the aviation industry safer by addressing all the causes of crashes and not just looking at one cause. The problem of plane crashes is extremely complex. We looked at all the causes of plane crashes and we addressed them one by one, to make the industry dramatically safer. We need to have the same attitude with mental illness and suicide. If we want to solve the problems of mental illness and suicide, then we have to look at multiple causes, approaches and solutions.

Too often in suicide prevention, we put almost all our time and effort into trying to prevent teenage suicides in schools because we hear about this in the media so much, we assume this is where most suicides occur. School students who die by suicide make up less than five percent of the total suicides in almost all countries, including New Zealand, which has the highest youth suicide rate in the OECD. In New Zealand, there are roughly 500-700 suicides each year and roughly 25-35 of these are teen suicides of school students.[21] A lot of teenagers who die by suicide are not in school.

Obviously, this is an important group, but in most countries a much higher risk group for suicide is the 17-25-year-old age group. Often school is a relatively safe environment, it's often when students leave school that things can go wrong. The next highest group is males in the 45-65 age group. The highest risk group for suicide is men aged 85 and over. We may say they are old, why bother trying to save them? If we can help them to stay alive they can have maybe ten more years of meaningful life.

We often target a small percentage of the at-risk group for suicide and then we wonder why the suicide statistics are not changing! If we want to change things then we have to look at who is most at risk.

The final point that I want to make in this chapter is that this is not something that only one group of people can do. We didn't reduce the problem of aviation crashes by saying "We'll leave it to the pilots." In terms of suicide prevention, we need everyone to say, "I can play a role in this. It might be a big role, it might be a small role, but I can have a role in this." Whoever you are, you have a role in suicide prevention. This is something every single person in the world needs to take an active responsibility for. There are some aspects of this that need to be left to the professionals, but there are many things everyone in the community can do.

There will, of course, be some who will say suicide prevention is impossible. If you went back in time to the sixties and told people that many countries aim to be smoke-free by 2025, people would have said it simply can't be done. The change will be too great and people will resist. Well, we have made incredible inroads into reducing smoking. We didn't get where we are today with a group of people saying it's impossible. A dedicated group of individuals boldly decided to make a significant change to society for the better. We can do the same with suicide. One of the greatest philosophers of the 21st Century, Mr Robert T Builder asked the question "Can we fix this?" I believe the answer is an emphatic "Yes we can!"

To recap…

There is strong evidence that people who plan to die by suicide will not just do it another way if we can stop them.

We have solved significant social problems in the past. I believe there is no reason why we cannot do the same with suicide.

We should look to the way the aviation industry was made safer as a good guide to suicide prevention.

We must look at multiple causes of suicide and target the most at-risk groups if we are to truly make a difference.