

BEGINNINGS & ENDINGS

When the End Becomes A New Beginning

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The story of John Kevin Hines, described below, examines the journey of a suicidal person's thoughts, actions, and behaviors prior to attempting suicide and follows his life after surviving a suicide attempt. Through phenomenological research, we have the opportunity to visit the inner thoughts of a suicide attempt survivor. The case also illustrates the newest interventions and techniques for identifying and treating individuals with negative thought patterns known as the "Critical Inner Voice" and how Voice Therapy can be utilized for treatment. In addition, the article addresses the importance of National Suicidal Prevention Forums, the need for education to the general public, and the importance of decreasing the stigma associated with mental illness.

My name is John Kevin Hines. On September 25, 2000, I tried to kill myself by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. It wasn't the first time that I tried to commit suicide; it was my second attempt and this time I was determined to succeed. I had felt lost since I was 16 years old. I was chronically ill with bipolar disorder and severe depression.

I heard voices echoing in my head, "Jump now, you must die, you are a bad person." And I believed them. I went out to the bridge and walked back and forth across the span. Finally I found a spot: hey this is it, this is the place I'm going to end my life. I thought, "This is what I have to do. I'm a bad person; I'm a burden to my family and friends. I'm hurting them with this bipolar, this annoying nuisance. Nobody cares, nobody cares, and it's time to go."

I turned, walked back to the railing next to the roadway on the bridge, next to the traffic, I ran and I shoved myself, only using my arms, over the bridge. I did not get on the ledge to have someone talk me out of it. I was too gone, I was too emotionally upset, and I was too angry at myself for the wrong reasons. I was sick, I was mentally ill, I am mentally ill. I hit freefall, and at that second I knew what I did was a terrible mistake. "How can I go back, how can I change this, how can I stop this? I can't, It's over, I'm 19 years old. I'm dead." John Kevin Hines (Parr, 2006)

Kevin's words highlight the three premises underlying the

work of clinical psychologist and theorist Robert Firestone, Ph.D. Dr. Firestone notes that we can only begin to understand suicidal thoughts and behavior once we come to know and understand the driving forces behind self-destructive behavior (R. Firestone, 1997b). He believes there is a division that exists within all of us: the life affirming, goal-directed "self system" and the self-critical, self-destructive "demon or antiself" (R. Firestone, 1997a). Kevin's inner critical voice at the height of his mental illness, sleep deprivation, depression, and despair, clearly depicts this. The "voice" [highlighted above] refers to an internal system of hostile thoughts and attitudes, antithetical to the self and cynical toward others. It reaches its most dangerous and life-threatening expression in suicidal acting-out behavior. (R. Firestone, 1986, p. 439).

Dr. Firestone's early investigations into the voice process demonstrated that self-destructive thoughts exist on a continuum--from mild self-critical thoughts ("you're stupid, what's wrong with you") to thoughts of extreme self-hatred ("no one could ever love you, you don't deserve anything in life, you are a waste of air") to actively suicidal thoughts as reflected in Kevin's words. Self-destructive thoughts lead to emotional pain ranging from mild depression to intense self-hatred. Internalized self-hatred, combined with despair and desperation, directly impact the likelihood of suicide. In fact, research has found self-destructive thoughts to be predictive of suicide risk. Research on the Firestone Assessment of Self-Destructive Thoughts (FAST) (R. Firestone & L. Firestone, 1996) has found the scale to be a reliable and valid measure for assessing risk.

All suicidal people are ambivalent. Kevin demonstrated this in his wish to be asked by someone on the bridge if he was okay, to tell that person everything, and to get the help he needed. Kevin was very fortunate to live through his suicide attempt from the Golden Gate Bridge where less than 1% of people who jump survive. But he is an excellent example of the fact that once someone becomes suicidal, it does not mean he or she will always be suicidal. As many note, "suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem or state of mind."

Kevin became actively involved in treatment first in an inpatient unit and later in outpatient psychotherapy. On a daily basis he continues to better understand his inner voices. He still struggles with negative thoughts about himself, but they do not reach life-threatening proportions. Currently, Kevin is a public speaker and advocate for suicide prevention and for barriers to be placed on the Golden Gate Bridge. He is a member of the Mental Health Board of San Francisco and the Psychiatric Foundation of Northern California. Kevin now has a very different outlook on life and demonstrates the triumph of the

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self-system. “I want to say I love myself, I love God, and I love life, and to love life is something very new to me. I hated it for so long. Hating yourself is a terrible, terrible thing and when you find yourself and love yourself, that’s true beauty. Then you can go on and love others.”

Kevin’s work highlights the importance of decreasing the stigma associated with mental illness and suicide. This can be achieved by hosting suicide prevention forums and programs in our area. Through education we can provide awareness to the community. We can educate parents, children, and professionals to identify someone who needs help and to connect them to available resources in their community. In Kevin’s words:

I hope those of you who read my story will come away with something to think about, or better yet, take action. I hope that my story will help save lives. I think that with education we could stamp out the stigma associated with suicide and suicide attempts. ▲

References available on request from the LACPA office at 818-905-0410.

LACPA member Lisa Firestone, Ph.D., is Director of Research and Education with the Glendon Association. She is a practicing clinical psychologist and author of numerous articles and chapters and coauthor of Conquer Your Critical Inner Voice and Creating a Life of Meaning and Compassion: The Wisdom of Psychotherapy, and most recently Sex and Love in Intimate Relationships. Dr. Firestone is the coauthor of FASI/FAST©, scales to assess self-destructive behavior and suicide (PAR).

Jamie Rotnofsky, Ph.D., is the Executive Director of The Glendon Association. She is certified as a rehabilitation counselor and psychodramatist and is practicing clinical psychologist. Dr. Rotnofsky is an expert in crisis services and was actively involved in providing support after the 9/11 tragedy in New York. Dr. Rotnofsky is an adjunct professor at Antioch University and holds a National Teleconference entitled “Care Connections”.

Drs. Firestone and Rotnofsky may be reached at www.glendon.org or 805-681-0415.

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