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HIDDEN BODIES

Teen and pact suicides may get all the headlines, but the real epidemic is among young men. Their suicide rate has soared to four times that of young women. Why hasn't anyone noticed?

by Jack Kammer and Tim Sayles

Suppose someone asked you to explain why the suicide rate for young American women has shot up dramatically since 1971, while the rate for young men has held steady. You might think for a moment and say, "Well, it's probably because women are having trouble with all this Super Woman business—trying to handle a career and all the traditional female roles at the same time. College women might be confused and suffering from career-choice anxieties. Women out of college might be finding out just how stressful the business world really is. Etcetera, etcetera."

All that would make good sense. It is what the experts were predicting. But, it's not true. Since 1971, in fact, the suicide rate for young women has dropped a little.

The truth is, the suicide rate among young *men* has skyrocketed. From 1970 to 1984, the last year for which complete statistics are available, the suicide rate among 15- to 24-year-old American males soared 52 percent. For males 25 to 34, the rate climbed 26 percent. Over the same period, the rate for females 15 to 24 increased only five percent, and for 25- to 34-year-old women, it *dropped* 29 percent.

Shocked? Join the club. Public perception seems badly out of sync with reality. Teenage suicide, and now "pact" suicide, is what you see on the evening news. But, what you don't see is that males are *four times* more likely to be the subject of those reports than females. And, that ratio holds in the young adult age groups, as well.

Granted, the current trend is strictly a matter of degree. For as long as the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics has been keeping track (since 1933), the suicide rate for young men has always been higher than that of young women. But, since the early 1970s, the gap has grown markedly. In the 25-to-34 age group, the male-female ratio jumped from 2.3 in 1971 to 4.1 in 1984. That's 4.1 men for every woman, per 100,000—nearly double in just 13 years. The ratio for 15- to 24-year-olds for that period rose from 3.0 to 4.66. And, if you're guessing that the 15- to 24-year-old group is "loaded" because of all those unstable teenagers, guess again. The upper half of the age group, 20 to 24, has roughly twice the suicide rate of the 15- to 19-year-olds.

Why are young men killing themselves in such accelerated and record numbers? Why young men, especially young white men, who supposedly have it all?

All right, that's an impossibly difficult, complex question. You could point to the disintegration of the American nuclear family, the proliferation of drug and alcohol abuse, the new rootlessness of professional life, a less-forgiving economy, increased competition among baby boomers. . . . You can't just take a look under the hood and say, "Well, *there's* your problem. You've got all kinds of gook down there in your psyche. . . ." And, even if it were that simple, very few people ever bother to look under the hood, at least when it comes to men.

Still, the experts seem to be in loose agreement on the fundamental problem: a sort of Nutcracker Effect peculiar to men. One side of the nutcracker is made of 100 percent, made-in-the-U.S.A., case-hardened Pressure to Succeed. The other side is a rigid, unforgiving and complex alloy known as Manliness. Or, less metaphorically, an *inability to admit weakness and seek help.* And, for more and more young men, the squeeze proves unbearable.

Regarding social pressure, much of the problem seems to lie in the very phrase, "having it all"—a vague, and perhaps unattainable, goal that nevertheless enjoys high esteem in mainstream American culture. It's the high-paying job, the townhouse in Old Town, the BMW/Saab/Volvo, the MBA, the never ending social whirl, the beautiful and intelligent mate, the . . . the Michelob commercial. But, it's always someone else who has it all. For the vast majority of us, items on the having-it-all list are often mutually exclusive. If you want the townhouse in Old Town, forget about the BMW. If you want the high-paying job, forget about the beautiful and intelligent mate. You *can't* really have it all. You can only compromise.

"We put unbearable pressure on ourselves sometimes," says Dr. Kim Smith, an associate director of the Menninger Clinic in Albuquerque, N.M., and a leading investigator of male suicide. He points to the notion that "men are *supposed* to have it all" as a prime suspect in the increased rate of male suicide.

But, if social pressure was the only cause, why wouldn't women—who populate the pressure cooker in ever-increasing numbers—show a similar increase in suicide? All else being equal, they should. But, they don't. So something's not equal.

The best guess among experts is that men, unlike women, are men—which is not as lame as it sounds. Somewhere in the murky regions of

Illustration by Tim Campbell/Mendola Artists

the male mind, where genetic predisposition and cultural conditioning intertwine, lies a behavioral mandate that says, "Thou shalt not admit weakness; thou shalt not seek help; thou shalt *tough it out.*" Women never hear this internal refrain, the reasoning goes, and, consequently, have a higher degree of immunity from life's pressures. Furthermore, and perhaps to the very heart of the issue, this greater immunity combines with all the positive byproducts of entering the business and professional realms—higher self-esteem, social independence, etc. However oversimplified it may be, the hypothesis is a tantalizingly neat explanation of the suicide phenomenon's most dramatic and current aspect—a rapidly widening gap between men and women.

"Ten and 20 years ago there were dire predictions from the experts that suicide rates for women entering business would climb as high as the rates for men," says Indiana University psychology professor John McIntosh. "Everybody was looking at the negative aspects of the traditional male role—the competitiveness, the stress, the ruthlessness. Nobody talked about the good things the male role could offer women—increased self-esteem, financial independence, security, enhanced self-worth. All of these things have more than offset the negative effects." And, McIntosh concludes, women brought one very important capability with them into the new role: "The ability to ask for help. . . . Men haven't gotten that yet."

According to Smith, women can seek help without feeling less feminine; men do so at the perceived risk of losing their masculinity. Which may explain the statistics on attempted suicide. While men *succeed* in committing suicide far more often than women, women are three times more likely to attempt it. Psychologists refer to it as "parasuicidal behavior." While many, including Smith, believe parasuicidal behavior is largely manipulative and attention-getting, it is also viewed as simply another way, albeit a drastic one, of asking for help—i.e., weakness, unmanliness. So men don't do that.

"When men decide to kill themselves, they usually use a gun," says Smith. "That's a little more likely to result in death than swallowing 20 aspirin." The aspirin-swallowing will attract attention, but the woman who swallowed them will survive to talk about it.

Dr. Herb Goldberg, a clinical psychologist and professor at Cal State University and author of *The Hazards of Being Male,* suggests that the difference between men and women in this regard is one of "helplessness" versus "hopelessness." He says that suicidal women feel helpless and, therefore, ask for help; suicidal men feel hopeless and, therefore, kill themselves.

"In the undertow of masculinity," he says, "a powerful sense of hopelessness develops—a feeling of being trapped, that there are no options left. A man becomes progressively isolated and negative in his perception of the world—closed up and also fearful. . . . Often a man is not sure there's anybody out there who really cares about him. Plus, he doesn't want to get in anybody's way so he kind of leaves 'like a man.' "

In some ways, men are correct in concluding that nobody really cares, Goldberg says. "Men's struggles don't get compassion from anybody in this society. Women's struggles do. Children's struggles do. Even animals' struggles do. On an unconscious level, our society has almost a hatred of men. We're useful as objects who perform and produce, but once we get too humanized, so to speak, once we get too vulnerable—our emotions hanging out, our pain hanging out—we're sort of repulsive to most people. It's like the culture doesn't want to see it."

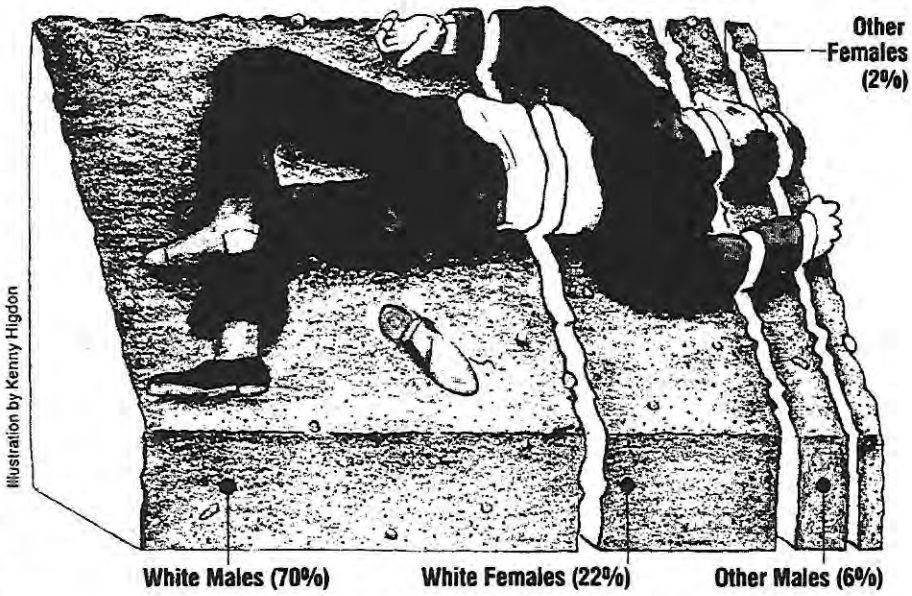
This attitude apparently includes men themselves, who, in Goldberg's view, feel "threatened by the man who's falling apart." In a study cited by Dr. Alan Berman, past president of the American Association of Suicidology, men were far more harsh on other men who attempted or committed suicide than women were. Men viewed even the thought of suicide as weakness. "That's probably a projection of our own male issues," Berman says. "We don't want to face males having problems. Maybe it reminds us of our own."

Whether it's a matter of societal ignorance, societal revulsion or the fact that men *hide* their problems and, therefore, create less demand for institutional help—it's clear that the social help network for men, compared to that for women, is all but nonexistent. Thus, the problem compounded and perpetuated.

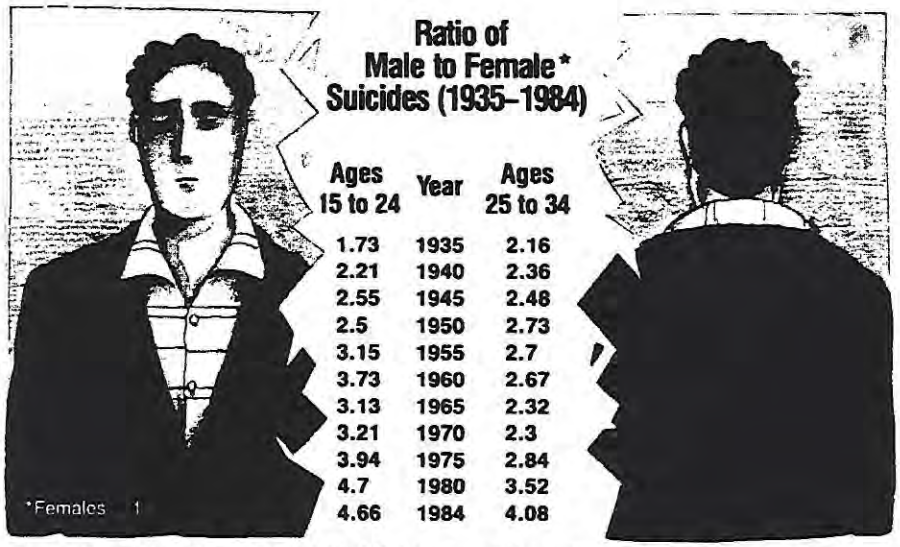
When men do seek help, according to Susan Bratton of the Boston office of The Samaritans, an international suicide prevention service, they're almost invariably closer to the edge than suicidal women. "Women call lots of times saying, 'One day, I think I might.' They don't mind asking for help," says Bratton, who has fielded perhaps as many as 1,000 hotline calls—the majority, as you might guess, from women. "Men are more likely to say, 'I have the gun right here in my hand.' Men feel that in order to get help they have to be much more definite."

By and large, no matter what the problem is, men keep it to themselves. The pressure builds and builds until—

Distribution of Suicides by Race and Sex, (U.S., 1980)



Source: Centers for Disease Control, *Suicide Surveillance Summary, 1970–1980,* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1985



Ages 15 to 24	Year	Ages 25 to 34
1.73	1935	2.16
2.21	1940	2.36
2.55	1945	2.48
2.5	1950	2.73
3.15	1955	2.7
3.73	1960	2.67
3.13	1965	2.32
3.21	1970	2.3
3.94	1975	2.84
4.7	1980	3.52
4.66	1984	4.08

Illustration by Kenny Higdon

Source: Centers for Disease Control, *Youth Suicide Surveillance, 1970–1980,* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1986

POW—nobody can help them. Ken Baldwin is a classic case. Now 30 and still alive, he is affable and animated in describing the anguish which slammed his life against the surface of the San Francisco Bay at 70 miles per hour on August 21, 1985.

"I had a decent job as a mechanical drafter," he says. "But, I was having trouble pleasing my boss. I expected myself to be perfect. I wasn't. I was letting my parents down. I was letting my wife down. To me, that meant I was garbage. I didn't deserve to live.

"A man is very connected to the way he earns a living. If a man doesn't make good money, he's a bum. If I were a woman, it would have been different. . . . I didn't tell my boss about my problem because I didn't think he'd understand. I didn't tell my wife because I didn't want to bother her. It was my problem."

It is the textbook example of the Nutcracker Theory (were there a textbook): on one side, the self-imposed pressure to excel, to live up to what he *thought* his wife, his parents and his boss expected of him. On the other side, a stoic stubbornness not to seek help, not to "bother" anyone with it.

So far, we've only looked at the psycho-social aspects of the nutcracker. There is a political dimension as well—a school of thought that puts some of the blame on women or, at least, the women's movement. In 1985, at the Virginia Consortium of Professional Psychology, Dr. Edward S. Gold tested and interviewed a group of college students who had attempted suicide. Among the males, he found difficulties in four main areas: acting autonomously, deferring to authority, defending themselves against verbal attack and asserting themselves in the face of possible rejection. A common denominator in these four problems, Gold says, was "lowered ego strength."

"It's entirely possible, that the women's movement has had a lot to do with that," he says. "Although feminism has helped women achieve gains toward social and economic equality, the movement's effects on men have been much less favorable. Since the early 1970s, there has been a constant barrage of finger-pointing, a tremendous amount of finger-pointing on every front."

Not only is it possible that the women's movement has lessened men's ability to withstand pressure, it may have added to the pressure, as well. In 1975, Dr. Warren Farrell, a social scientist now living in San Diego, wrote *The Liberated Man,* in which he sought to enlist men's support for women's liberation. His reasoning, basically, was that as women became more financially independent, men would benefit from the lightened burden and, as a result, would become more relaxed, fun, mellow creatures, less focused on work, competition and money. And, women would cherish us for our enhanced humanness.

But, in his new book, *Why Men Are The Way They Are,* Farrell says it didn't turn out that way. The pressure to "provide" for women, to win them through performance and material superiority has not been diminished by the women's movement. In fact, he says, it may be greater than ever. Most women, Farrell asserts, still cling to the "primary fantasy" of having a man take care of them. So, as women make more money, the pressure on men to earn even more has only increased. To illustrate his point, he uses two diamond ring advertisements from *Ms.* magazine, one from April 1982 and one from March 1984. The ads are identical, with two important exceptions—in the later ad, the size of the diamond has doubled and the amount of gold has tripled. To be able to purchase the new, improved ring with "two months salary," which the ad suggests as reasonable, the lucky groom would need an annual salary of $168,000.

"I'd like to see men break the addiction to the beautiful woman who is only beautiful," Farrell says, "to develop an eye for women who are beautiful because they make us feel good about ourselves for who we are rather than what we do. The more we choose women who value us only for our economic success, the more we increase our burden to be successful economically. It takes real internal effort to train ourselves to make positive associations with that kind of good woman, as opposed to the quasi-anorexic, cosmetic woman who is putting out signals that say, 'I can have men compete for me and provide for me.' "

Men will be better off, Farrell suggests, if they can shake the notion that they are unworthy of a woman unless they can provide for her, offer her luxuries and options they would never dream of having themselves. "We need to overcome the training which says we are unequal to women as human beings, that we must give them something besides our company, our energy and our love."

The apolitical theorists, in their search for the antidote, focus on men learning to accept their frailties and to seek help.

Smith, of the Menninger Clinic, says if men insist on being "strong" about things, they should strive for resilient strength, not brittle strength. When it's necessary, they should be able to say, "Okay, *this* is difficult for me," and talk to somebody about it. Get help.

Indiana's Dr. McIntosh concedes right off that the typical male is going to be very cautious about that kind of behavior. He can't just turn off a defense system that is as much a part of him as his arms and legs. But, he doesn't have to, McIntosh says, at least not for the whole world to see. All it takes sometimes is one anonymous phone call, or one confidential visit to a mental health center. And the rest of the world will never know that he is not perfect. ■