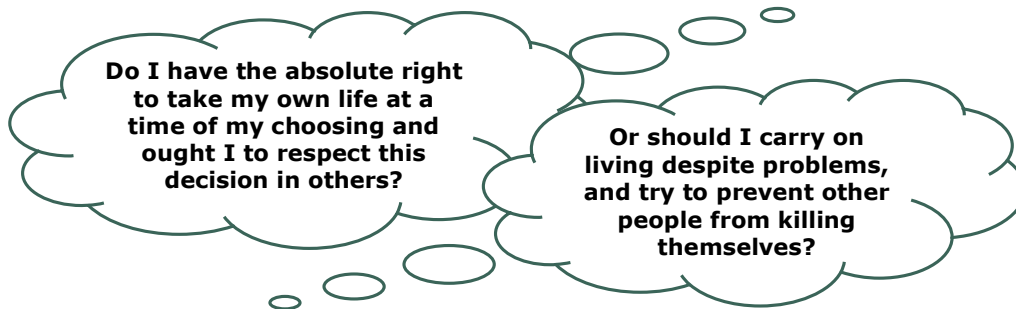

A humanist discussion of... SUICIDE

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use **reason, experience** and **respect for others** when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They promote fulfilment in this life because they believe it is the only one we have. They respect the **human need for happiness and personal autonomy and choice, but also recognise a general duty to respect and preserve life**. These seem to come into conflict when considering suicide:



Some facts to consider

In English law, suicide was a crime until 1961, and attempted suicide could be punished (though it rarely was). Suicide is no longer a crime today, although assisting a suicide is still illegal (see BHA briefing on Euthanasia).

Some people kill themselves because they are suffering from an incurable illness and can only foresee suffering, deterioration and eventual death. Humanists would respect this decision, and support changes in the law which would permit sufferers to seek assistance.

Many attempted suicides are not intended to succeed - they are "cries for help" and it would be right to try to discourage these and to offer the necessary help. Sadly, some "cries for help" go unheard or the attempts succeed better than was intended.

Many suicides are caused by treatable depression. This is a waste of life, and one that could be avoided with counselling or medical or psychiatric care.



Humanist thinking on suicide

Many religious people consider suicide wrong, because matters of life and death are felt to be for God to decide. This is not a convincing argument for people who do not believe in a god. Humanists would **judge each situation individually, considering the wishes of those involved, the alternatives** and the **possible consequences**.

Anyone contemplating suicide ought to consider the **effects on family and friends** - the consequences can be devastating for those left behind and this is the main reason that suicide can be considered wrong. Suicide can sometimes be a very selfish act.

Anyone contemplating suicide should seriously consider **less damaging alternatives**: many problems can be solved if thought through rationally (difficult if you are at the end of your tether or

extremely depressed) or if help is sought. A break from the problem - time off work, leaving home for a bit, seeking medical help - may help to put things in perspective.

Humanist ideals include greater tolerance of difference, and **support for isolated, depressed, and disadvantaged people**. Some suicides could be avoided if people showed more care and concern for others. Few people need be as isolated and alone as they may feel - there will be others in the same situation and there may be organisations which can offer help, support and a sense of belonging.

It is right to do your best to dissuade a suicide - talk, friendship, practical advice and help, listening, may all help. It may be right to intervene more forcibly, say, by reviving or force-feeding would-be suicides - but this would depend on the situation. If you have done your best you should not feel guilty or responsible, whatever the outcome. One can only do one's best.

Humanists believe that **quality of life is important**, and that if someone, after careful and rational thought, decides that his or her quality of life is so poor that s/he would rather be dead, this should be respected.

Questions to think about

- o Is committing suicide morally different from killing oneself slowly or taking risks with one's life by drinking and smoking excessively or taking drugs?
- o What makes a life worth living?
- o Should religious people impose their moral views on non-religious people? Yes? Sometimes? Never?
- o How are you deciding the answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
- o How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?

Further reading

A more concise version of this perspective, together with many others designed for easy photocopying and much useful information for teachers, can be found in *Humanist Perspectives 2* available to buy at www.humanism.org.uk

Also available from the BHA's website -

- o Other BHA briefings: *Thinking about ethics ; Euthanasia ; Human Rights*, etc.
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group, (2000), *For your own good?* (BHA)
- o Humanist Philosophers' Group (2002), *What is Humanism?* (BHA)
- o Eds Peter Cave and Brendan Larvor *Thinking About Death* (BHA, 2004) Philosophical essays on death and dying.
- o Barbara Smoker (1998), *Humanism* (BHA)

Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (Penguin)

Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge)