

Book review

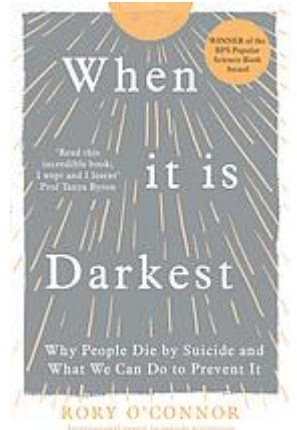
When it is darkest: Why people die by suicide and what we can do to prevent it

Author: Rory O'Connor

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Rory O'Connor is a world-leading expert in suicide prevention, having worked in the area for more than 25 years. Based at the University of Glasgow, his academic credentials are impressive, as is his connection on a human level to the most complex of global public health issues – suicide. I was fortunate to attend the 2023 IASP conference in Piran, Slovenia, where Rory was a daily keynote speaker – one with rock star status. Conference attendees flocked to him following his presentations, there were queues for selfies and precious time to draw on his knowledge about the subject of suicide. I spoke with one of his PhD students; she raved about his humanity, his intellectual rigor, and his desire to make sense of suicide and suicidal behaviour. Rory is the real deal, with all the insight required to write such an important book.

Early in the book, Rory lays out his desire to delve into the mind of someone who is suicidal, and to understand the complex set of factors that leads to suicide. As Rory says, 'I live, breathe and, quite literally, dream about suicide.' He is honest about his own experiences of mental distress and why therapeutic care has been so helpful to his continued wellbeing. It reinforces his belief that accessing therapy early can be a critical life-saving intervention for people in suicidal distress.

The book is divided into four sections, weaving together expert opinion, personal insight and lived experience to gain understanding into what makes someone feel suicidal and then why a smaller amount of people then go on to attempt suicide. Many short case studies back up the reader's understanding. It also handily provides advice on supporting suicidal people and how to support the suicide bereaved.

For clinicians and/or people supporting someone at risk of suicide, Rory provides a detailed description of a model he's developed to understand suicide risk – the integrated motivational-volitional model. It provides a framework to make sense of suicidality and can help you understand why some people become suicidal in the first place and others may die of suicide. Don't be put off by the academic aspect of it, he does a brilliant job at explaining it to the novice as well, weaving case studies into the theory.

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Rory O'Connor is engaging, entertaining and able to explain suicide prevention action in a way that is understandable to us all, no matter your knowledge. Rory's gift is the ability to walk the fine balance of being an academic, yet write for the person who may have lost a loved one to suicide and wants to know more about the complexity of suicidal behaviour. He is a leading light in the world of suicide prevention and this is a must-have book for anyone wanting to understand this most complex of human behaviours. It brilliantly straddles both the lived experience world and therapeutic world. Definitely add this to your collection. I recommend it often to suicide bereaved and, without doubt, people are impressed by its approachability.

Review by Mark Wilson, MHF Communications & Marketing Team Lead (Media)

Disclaimer: Please note these reviews are not intended as endorsements or recommendations from the Mental Health Foundation. This feature introduces resources that may be useful for individuals with an interest in mental health and wellbeing topics.