

# SUICIDE PACT: TILL DEATH DO US PART...

Anne-Frederique Naviaux<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Adeel Ur Rahim<sup>1</sup> & Pascal Janne<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Psychiatrists of Ireland and Health Service Executive (HSE),  
Summerhill Community Mental Health Service, Wexford, Ireland

<sup>2</sup>CHU UCL Namur, Université catholique de Louvain, Yvoir, Belgium

## SUMMARY

**Background:** Suicide pacts are always tragic though they remain under-identified and under-reported. History and fiction are full of them, though they would only represent less than one percent of all suicides in Occident. A suicide pact is an agreement made between two or more people to commit suicide together and requires a reciprocal consent but also intent, volition and capability. Victims, motivations and operating methods are multiple, and continue to diversify even more with Internet and social media. How can we identify people at risk?

**Subjects and methods:** Between November 2023 and May 2024, a literature search based on electronic bibliographic databases as well as other sources of information (grey literature) was conducted in order to investigate the most recent data on suicide pacts and especially how they evolved with Internet and social media.

**Results:** Different categories of suicide pacts can be made, but the typical template for a prospective suicide pact describes as two withdrawn individuals, in a tight and close relationship, who feel ensnared in a desperate and unmitigable situation.

**Conclusions:** Prevention can done at various levels, but screening individuals who fit the profile for risk would certainly be a start. To identify a suicide pact, forensics, criminology and sociology need to be considered.

**Key words:** suicide - suicide pact – internet – forensics – criminology – sociology - psychiatry

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## INTRODUCTION

Suicides are typically solitary and private events (Serinelli et al. 2022) by opposition to suicide pacts which represent less than 1% of all suicides in Occident (Kim et al. 2023) but possibly one-third of the total suicides in South Korea (Lee & Kwon 2018).

A suicide pact can be defined as an agreement between two or more people to commit suicide together, generally at a specific time, place, manner and method (Stanford University 2024). Both intent and capability must be shared in a suicide pact, but the essential feature of the suicide pact is the mutual consent of two or more people to kill themselves together (Prat et al. 2013). It is often planned and prepared in secret (Brulin-Solignac et al. 2021), involving small group of people sharing individual and personal motivations, often associated with romantic or heroic themes (Galante et al. 2022).

Although personal acquaintance is a common denominator in most suicide pacts, Internet and social media have seen the rise of a type of suicide pact formed online, also called cyber-suicide pact, between individuals who have no social connections and are total strangers (Salvatore 2024). For Katherine Ramsland (2017), “completing suicide as part of a pact, is a show of loyalty, even devotion or sense of higher purpose”.

## SUBJECTS AND METHODS

Between November 2023 and May 2024, a literature search based on electronic bibliographic databases as well as other sources of information (grey literature)

was conducted in order to investigate the most recent data on suicide pacts.

Indeed the concept of ‘suicide pact’ has evolved with time but especially with the development of internet and social media. Subsequently, motivations and operating methods have also changed.

Additionally, this study defines and explains current terms associated to ‘suicide pact’ and used to describe various collective deaths.

## RESULTS

### Definition and Terminology

A ‘suicide pact’ is a reciprocal commitment, made by two or more people, to kill themselves together, generally at a specific time, place, manner and method. The pact necessarily requires the mutual consent of all parties (no coercion), but also intent and capacity (Prat et al. 2013). Most suicide pacts involve 2 adults and are often called double suicide.

‘Dyadic death’ refers to the simultaneous death of two people either as part of a pact, or as a choice to accompany the death of the first person without any agreement or as part of a murder-suicide without the consent of the victim (Rajagopal 2004, Prat et al. 2013).

If the suicide pact involve more than 2 persons, it can intra-familial (sometimes including assenting children) or extra-familial (Sarkar et al. 2014).

‘Suicide contagion’ can be viewed as a situation in which the same behavior (suicide) spreads quickly and spontaneously through a group (Gould et al. 2003). The persons most susceptible to suicide contagions are those

under 25 years of age (Wikipedia 2024). A collection of suicidal incidents might occur as a 'point' or 'mass' cluster, and might be explained by 'assortive relating' as per suicidologist Thomas Joiner (Ramsland 2017). Of course, the impact of (social) media coverage is not to be denied as per the 'Werther effect' (Gould et al. 2003). 'Mass suicide' usually occurs in cults, in a context of strong religious, political or military reasons (Rajagopal 2004, Sarkar et al. 2014, Brulin-Solignac et al. 2021, Kim et al. 2023).

### **Law and History: a few notions**

Suicide pacts have always existed and are abundantly illustrated throughout history, as well as in fiction; let's mention, for example, the suicide pact between Rudolf, Crown Prince of Austria and Baroness Mary Vetsera, Marc Antony and Cleopatra and the Irigny Lovers.

But, in the years after the First World War, the 'suicide pact' represented a brief, but quite real legal, social and cultural problem in Britain, affecting mainly young couples. At the time, it was considered the product of a specific tension emerging from intimate and social modernity and consumerism, increasingly blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality, encouraging people to imagine themselves as hero(ines) of their own love stories. The suicide pact 'crisis' emerged in the spaces between the imagined ideal of romantic happiness and the messy reality of its failure. It shed light on how people negotiated their desires, intimacies and sense of self in the space between mass culture and the norms, values and networks of everyday life (Fredrikson 2023). In 1957 Britain, the passing of the Homicide Act provides that the survivors of a suicide pact were guilty of manslaughter, not murder.

In Ireland, suicide ceased to be a crime in 1993. Furthermore, in 1997, the section 2 of Criminal Law Act facilitates a conviction for any of the offences such as: aiding, abetting, counselling, or procuring suicide. A person who aids, abets, counsels or procures the suicide of another, or an attempt by another to commit suicide, shall be guilty of an offence and shall be liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for a term not exceeding fourteen years (Irish Law 2024).

### **Anatomy of a suicide pact**

A suicide pact begins when two people consider dying together preferable to living. People choosing to commit double suicide are usually married, older (50-60 y old), from a higher social class and prefers non-violent methods (Serinelli et al. 2022, Galante et al. 2022, Wikipedia 2024). Without denying the influence of ethnicity, cultural and social background (Kim et al. 2023), the main risk factors of a suicide pact (Rosenbaum 1983) include an intimate relationship with strong ties, a history of suicide or suicide threats by the pact initiator, a precipitating factor and psychiatric disorder; mainly depression, borderline disturbances and narcissis-

tic neuroses (Haenel & Elsässer 2000). One individual (the 'instigator') often suggests the idea of the pact and induce the other (the 'cooperator') to join (Salvatore 2024). Typically, the instigator is a man suffering from depression and with a history of attempted suicide, while the cooperator is a woman generally without any preexisting psychopathology nor history of suicidality.

The decision to die together is usually taken when the couple's union is at risk. The common stressors are psychological and physical health problems as well as isolation, social losses and financial difficulties.

In the Western world, it typically involves health problems leading to the institutionalization of one of the partners. The suicide pact appears then as the ultimate way of taking control instead of being subjected to any loss of autonomy. The suicide is often premeditated and planned in secret and also takes longer to finalize as there is no single – decision maker or actor (Salvatore 2024). The chosen method to commit suicide must have a high lethality potential (to ensure that the other party does not survive) but also requires availability and accessibility. In many cases, toxic-related deaths either by inert gas inhalation with plastic bag suffocation or acute CO/drugs poisonings were documented; older subjects using more likely prescription medication. Victims often leave a will and/or a suicide note (Prat et al. 2013, Brulin-Solignac et al. 2021, Serinelli et al. 2022, Galante et al. 2022).

In Eastern countries, studies reports suicide pacts involve younger people: issueless couples, disappointed lovers, unmarried sisters and frustrated individuals but also a lot of families (Prat et al. 2013, Sarkar et al. 2014, Kuttichira 2018). In the latter case, living a life higher in standard than could be afforded (and resulting in financial difficulties) was a noticeable observation, while physical or mental health had less contribution. The persons involved in family suicides showed strong bonding among themselves but not with anyone outside their close family. Financial issues and social isolation are important factors just like in the theory of the 'encapsulated unit', serving as a substitute for society. This means that if the survival of the unit is threatened, each member of the unit will want to commit suicide as a way of maintaining it (Hemphill & Thornley 1969).

### **Cybersuicide pact**

Nowadays, a novel pattern of suicide pacts has been documented among much younger people and teenagers, who make arrangements to kill themselves together by means of sharing information on the Internet, via social media, microblogs or suicide chatrooms. Cyber-suicide pacts are formed online among troubled individuals who have no or only superficial social connections; they are seen as an escape from isolation, pain and daily stress rather than a noble exit (Huus 2003, Ramsland 2017, Stanford 2024). Internet suicide pacts originated in Japan, but might account for almost one third of the

suicides in South Korea (which has one of the highest suicide rates in the world) and have gained international attention (Luxton et al. 2012, Kwon & Lee 2018). The number of people joining a suicide pact tends to be larger than in a traditional suicide pact (Lee & Kwon 2018). Salvatore, in recent article for the FBI (2024), explains that “depressed individuals searching online for ways to cope with suicidal ideation may visit forums that both encourage suicide and supply instructions. Then, they find invitations posted by other emotionally vulnerable persons to join a suicide pact. The parties connect, acknowledge their respective feelings, agree on suicide as a solution, settle on method and timing, and go on to die apart but concurrently.”

Internet provides an unrivalled access to information and an unmediated avenue to share one’s feeling with other like-minded individuals (Luxton et al. 2012), it can provide support and assistance but can also suggest and reinforce negative thoughts and behaviors with no safety net or potential rescuers (Sedgwick et al. 2019, Salvatore 2024), and the question of capacity remains an issue. Via social media, some users might exert peer pressure and encourage others to kill themselves, idolize those who committed suicide and facilitate suicide pacts (Sedgwick et al. 2019, Stanford 2024, Wikipedia 2024).

Twitter appears to be a preferred place to find people to make a suicide pact, possibly because it offers a high level of anonymity and privacy (a user can create several accounts with different names and without disclosing much personal information), and also user-created content is more publicly consumed by others. Being a foreign social media, Twitter also escapes the laws and regulations from South Korea, where it is particularly popular (Lee & Kwon 2018, Galante et al. 2022, Lee 2023, Wikipedia 2024).

Several hypothesis were made to understand why people, who are total strangers, would rather commit suicide together, rather than alone, via a cyber-suicide pact. An individual might want to die with others because he/she is afraid not to have ‘the courage’ to commit suicide alone, and feels comfortable or less lonely to die with others. In a way, people would be looking for companionship, even in death; a suicide with others can be seen as a show of loyalty, affection, peace or even devotion if not ‘solace’ (Huus 2003, Ramsland 2017). The probability of successfully committing suicide is increased with a suicide pact by both reducing the fear of death and strengthening suicidal ideation (Jiang et al. 2016). Furthermore, if you don’t know how to do it, joining a suicide pact might provide you assistance from others (Lee & Kwon 2018). Many studies showed that media coverage of suicides increases the rate of suicide, and the magnitude of the increase is related to the amount, duration and prominence of coverage (Luxton et al. 2012, Sedgwick et al. 2019, Wikipedia 2024), but the influence of the internet is highly predominant due to the concealment and universality of online suicide information (Jiang et al. 2016).

## DISCUSSION

Suicide pacts are often under-reported and /or under-recognized; no accurate global statistics are available (Lee & Kwon 2018). To identify a suicide pact, forensics, criminology and sociology need to be considered.

From a forensic angle, a medical system of inquests is recommended; in view of making an evidence-based opinion on the manner of death and closure of such investigation, medical examiners are trained in both medicine (forensic pathology) and law. This type of medical system of inquests associates crime scene investigation (with crime scene visit and samples collection) and meticulous conduct of post mortem examination by autopsy surgeon (Devraj et al. 2022).

Suicide pacts also deserve criminal consideration as they require premeditation, volition and cooperation in harmony without coercion. Finding farewell notes can clarify the existence of a suicide pact; suggesting the relationship between the victims and the explicit consent of dying together, but also the reasons and the dynamics in the background (Galante et al. 2022).

Finally, suicide pacts have important sociological implications. As previously described ethnicity, culture and historical/social roots play a crucial part: time and modernity, heroes and romance, internet and social media...

## CONCLUSION

Suicide pacts represent a complex social phenomenon, which raise severe medico-legal and criminological implications as well as interpretative challenges (Galante et al. 2022). The demography of the suicide pact can be divided in two categories. One consists of older married couple who decide to die together, because one or both are facing death or permanent separation in a context of medical illness or debilitating condition with loss of autonomy. The second group involves younger individuals in close or intimate relationships or attachments that are endangered by external stressors. In both categories, individuals share a very vulnerable and fragile connection and perceive the threat (to lose it) as certain (Salvatore 2024).

Cyber-suicide pacts are more recent, and prevail in Japan and South Korea. They generally involve young people and teenagers who form a pact to die together online in a context of ingenuine relationships, isolation, depression and daily stress (Stanford 2024).

Prevention of suicide pact need to focus on screening individuals at risk and disrupt the suicidal collaboration; which may break the bond and underlying rationale (Salvatore 2024).

Governments can certainly help by changing laws and regulations, training and education (Cheng 2011). Yet, precaution and anticipation start with parental monitoring, and include each and everyone’s attention: medical staff and mental health professionals but also police officers, teachers, social workers, neighbors and extended families.

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Anne-Frederique Naviaux: concept and design of article, literature searches, writing manuscript, approval of final version.

Muhammad Adeel Ur Rahim: literature searches.

Pascal Janne: approval of final version.

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**Correspondence:**

Naviaux Anne-Frederique, MD, MSc  
College of Psychiatrists of Ireland and Health Service Executive (HSE),  
Summerhill Community Mental Health Centre,  
Wexford, Y35 KC58, Ireland  
E-mail: [annefrederique.naviaux@hse.ie](mailto:annefrederique.naviaux@hse.ie)