

# BLACK DOGS

by Richard Tarran MVO

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**Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don't matter and those who matter won't mind”**

by Theodor Seuss Geisel (Dr Seuss).

**W**hy do so many of us know someone who has taken their own life? There I go again, avoiding the word so many people try not to use, suicide. Earlier this year I gave a talk at the North West Institute for Outdoor Learning Conference in Ambleside about this very subject. I recall the committee being a bit reticent about introducing such a macabre subject into a conference celebrating all that is good about the outdoors. For me the outdoors is a catalyst for conversations that are so often avoided. How often am I taking clients up a mountain when they start conversations about hitherto taboo subjects or start reflecting on their past life and their future hopes and dreams.

How easy would it be for outdoor practitioners to talk about suicide or everyday worries since just about everyone will come into contact with it during their life, either through depression, friends, colleagues or family members, even famous idols they hold in high regard. Only today I opened the front cover of my Mountain Training Association's magazine *The Professional Mountaineer* and there in the editorial is reference to a 'talented mountaineer who recently lost the love of his life in an avalanche accident and subsequently took his own life'.

How easy would it be for us as trusted and respected practitioners when in rapport with our confidants in the mountains to show our own vulnerability and talk about our own low moments in life and how we pulled through. Or have we rewritten our past so that it is all rosy and positive. Life's not like that is it? Have we ever felt as if we had no one to talk to, as if the walls were caving in, as if there was nowhere to turn, as if people would be dismissive, as if it would be humiliating to admit we cannot cope. Seeking help is one of the strongest, bravest things you can possibly do, but opening your mouth and sound coming out is the hardest.

What I want to do is simply break the stigma about talking about suicide and those 'black dog' times and shed some light on this and the dark spaces associated with it. Why can't people talk more about their feelings. The male psyche still finds it almost humiliating to admit it cannot cope.

I recall Stephen Fry talking about his depression, he became associated with it when he disappeared in 1995 and could not be found for three days. He hit the nail on the head when he said that people are liable to think 'why would someone like him be so depressed that he would want to kill himself?' He's so popular and famous and wealthy and he has such a fabulously interesting life making TV programmes and writing books. That should be enough shouldn't it? But you wouldn't ask why someone got cancer or diabetes or asthma like it was their fault. You wouldn't say: 'What have you got to get

cancerous about?' Those 'nothing to get depressed about' people don't understand that it's an illness. Some people get mentally ill and some don't – just as with a physical illness.

It is bizarre that we learn so much about physical health with science, biology and PE and yet mental health in school can be confined to PSHE. It is like a headless body, the balance seems all wrong given the figures.

If you look at the media you would think that terrorism, murder and violent crime are the major risks in the UK and the world, but perhaps consider how many people you know within two degrees of separation who have succumbed to these hazards compared to those you know who have taken their own life or become close to suicide.

For me, my cousin, a work colleague, school friend, social friend, close friend's son, female friend, local person's son and mother all chose to, or attempted to take their own life, or considered it and I think I'm quite normal.

In 2002, 57 million people in the world died.



Of these:  
172,000 died in war - interestingly the most peaceful time in history  
569,000 died in violent crime  
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741,000 Total  
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873,000 died of suicide (Source Yuval Harari's book Sapiens)

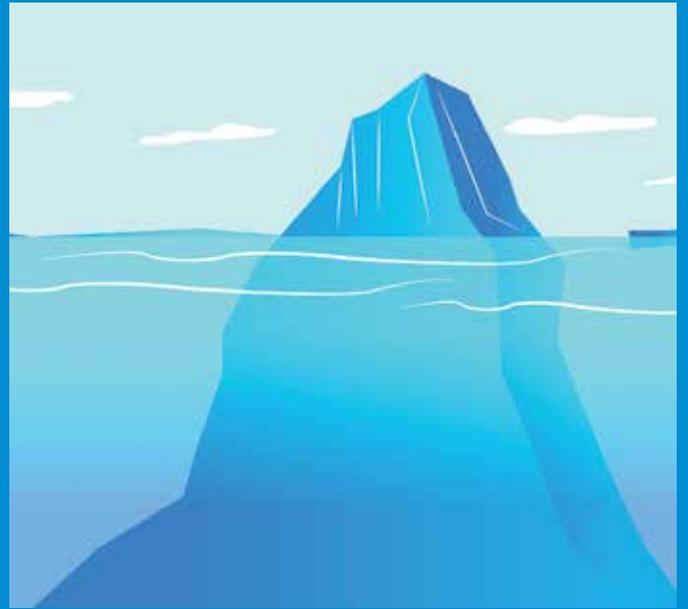
Clear comparable figures are hard to come by but this is what I discovered.

34 = The number of people killed by terrorism in UK in 2017  
640 = The Murder/Homicide figure for 2011 from the ONS  
1713 = Road Traffic Accident (RTA) fatalities in GB (from my speed awareness course recently)  
6708 = Suicides (Samaritans figure 2013)

Of these 6708, 48 were children under 15.  
Taking the Samaritan figures for 2014, male suicides = 4623  
That's more than 12 per day and 76% of the total

**How much effort and investment have we put into improving road safety and reducing fatalities? As outdoor practitioners how much focus do we put on Road Safety compared to the risk of talking about certain subjects?**

So suicide is in fact the large part below the surface of a depressing iceberg.



Sparked by Yuval Harari's best selling book I decided to check the figures. Not my natural style to look at detail but I felt sceptical. So I turned online to the Office of National Statistics (ONS). For some alarming reason the ONS does not consider suicides in the age group 10-15 in its statistics! The reason it seems may be that coroners' verdicts are inconsistent. Quite rightly I suppose there is a reluctance to cause upset in young cases and coroners err on the side of caution and leave open verdicts or verdicts of misadventure in an absence of concrete proof.

#### For the Outdoor Practitioner...

Could we simply pose some questions around the subject of suicide and depression without feeling we have to be experts? Could we approach the subject from a more common place perspective? i.e. standing on the top of a mountain saying "do you know - I once had a black dog moment - but a view like this helped me realise there will always be a sunrise and a new dawn."

Could we talk about it more than terrorism, crime and war?

Why don't we?

How could we?

What's stopping us?

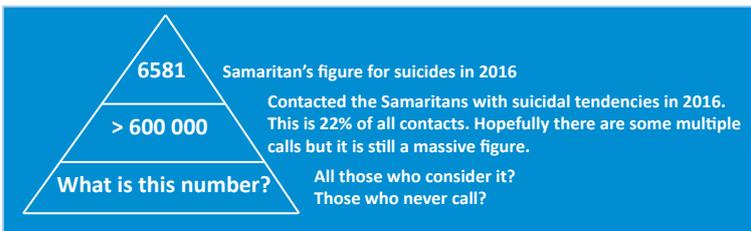
What if we did?

After all, in the past when I was at school we did not talk about homosexuality, HIV or child abuse.

I am also a development coach and it is amazing how often the subject of suicide comes up. Someone is suffering from stress at work and comes to see me. Behind that persona of a confident, successful executive I discover that her husband took his own life and her line manager doesn't seem to be making the connection. I was having lunch with a business executive the other day when they shared with me their father killed himself. I was having a business breakfast with some colleagues when someone mentioned they had a funeral of a close friend to attend the next day. They then lowered their voice and mouthed with no sound 'suicide'. Why did they feel they could not say it out loud?

It seems to me everyone knows someone who is affected by it, it is just not something you talk about apparently. I wonder if we did talk about it, if there might be less of it. Is the benefit of talking openly about it worth the risk? Perhaps a question to ask yourself.

So are there really more people taking their own lives each year than all the people killed in war, violent crime and war combined?



In the world of Risk Management and the Safety Culture we talk about the concept of Near Misses. As an outdoor practitioner I am not suggesting we become expert negotiators at talking people off parapets. It is not the 6581 we need to be focused on, it is the unknown figure at the bottom of the pyramid, the ones that if not openly engaged in conversation can become the >600 000 or even the statistic that does not call the Samaritans and later becomes part of the 6581.

Just take a look at the recent ChildLine report:  
<http://bit.ly/2cMOxj9>

301,413 counselling sessions with over 1900 about suicidal thoughts. I read a detailed ChildLine report from 2013/14 and it identifies that the majority, 61% of contacts about suicide are from 12-15 year olds. Suicide apparently appears as a top concern for girls at 12 years of age and boys at 14. This is what ChildLine has identified as the common issues:

- Hearing voices
- Depression
- Insomnia
- Feeling like a failure
- Not feeling in control of their lives
- Reclusive behaviour
- Feeling abnormal or 'weird'
- Eating problems
- Low self esteem

Can we as Outdoor Practitioners honestly say we have never had any of those? So how easy would it be for us to talk about it and share our stories.

Males are brought up to believe they are particularly good at shielding tough stuff and then turning off the lights. Just take a read of Grayson Perry's book 'The Descent of Man' and Robert Webb's 'How Not to be a Boy' to get their reflections which support this argument.

When James the son of a friend of mine that I was best man for took his own life his young friends soon after included him on a video which also included Stephen Fry - take a look at it..... just search 'Switch on the Light - You Tube.'

To quote someone of James's generation who knew James closely and who herself had suffered for two decades with self harm. Nadia summed up James as 'a 24 year old uni. graduate who oozed charisma out of every pore and had you in stitches with his random acts of hilarity', 'an infectious lust for life, bloke you wanted to be around, life and soul of every party'. She reflects 'how did I not spot the signs'....'I was under the impression he was fine as he never said anything to the contrary'....'while he had a sensitive side to his character, and the ability to sense when others around him were low and react in an empathetic and supportive way, we shared the same party animal gene'.....'he categorically is the last person on earth who would take his own life' she fiercely told people. Then Nadia highlights a crucial point:

Having ONE emotion - even if it is happiness - is unheard of and should flag up a warning.

What is going on inside is very different from what is apparent on the outside, our behaviour. Going back to Stephen Fry, he talks about the

worst emotion anyone can have is self pity. He says it is the most destructive emotion that exists and it destroys everything around it except itself. Dealing with it however is not so easy.

Nadia says simply 'the happiest in the room could be the saddest and that a smile can mask a lot'.

Featured in the 'Switch on the Light' video is Charlie McDonnell. Never heard of him, well with 2.32 million You Tube subscribers (Charlieissocoollike) perhaps we should. He is a young vlogger, musician and film maker and epitomises our innate human yearning to be liked. There is a virtual world of icons out there that many of us are just not aware of.

It made me think, should we not simply be sharing more openly the everyday things we are worried about, those black dog moments. Perhaps we would be surprised that our worries are not so unique. When we take young people, in fact any people, on outdoor experiences we often sit them down and get them to share their apprehensions so that others are reassured they are not alone. What an ideal opportunity to transfer that same reflection into everyday life. After all is that not what we are doing with outdoor education, is it not about the transfer of learning?

I talked about the vulnerability of us as Outdoor Practitioners. A good place to start would be to write down what worries and what dark moments you have got through in your life. Then you have the power to share them.

Please consider what more you can do in your Outdoor Learning Environment to engage the bottom of the Suicide Pyramid. You never know you might even reduce self harm too.

By the way - I am not qualified to write or talk on this subject. Why? There is not yet a Diploma or Open University course on Suicide as far as I am aware. I just want to reduce it.

If you have been personally affected by this article please contact one of these organisations who will listen. ■

#### Helpful Resources

Samaritans: Telephone number 116 123  
CALM The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) is an award-winning charity dedicated to preventing male suicide. CALM's free, confidential and anonymous helpline and webchat is open every single day, 5pm – midnight. 0800 58 58 58  
Mind 0300 123 3393 or Text 86463  
Childline (NSPCC) 0800 111  
NSPCC 0808 800 5000  
Mental Health Awareness Week - 14 - 20 May 2018

**Author's note:** when I first wrote this article I inadvertently used the phrase 'committed suicide' until it was pointed out to me that these two words should no longer be used together. In fact I should not have used them since 1961 when I was aged 2. It was in 1961 that it ceased to be a crime. Please, please try and be aware if you accidentally use them, apologise and say it another way.

#### About the author

Richard Tarran MVO is an Executive Business Coach in addition to being a Mountain Leader and APIOL. He has been involved in leading expeditions for World Challenge, Outlook and Raleigh International. He spent 16 years in the Royal Navy as a Marine Engineer Officer and was an Equerry to The Royal Family. He now delivers Leadership and Development training globally. With his passion for the outdoors he spends much of his time leading treks to the Atlas, Pyrenees and Julian Alps for his own company as well as teaching navigation and leading adults on inspiring journeys in the mountains of the UK. He is based in beautiful Swaledale on the route of the Coast to Coast walk. Richard is happy to talk to any groups or organisations about the subject contained in this article as a guest speaker. T: 07866 410616  
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