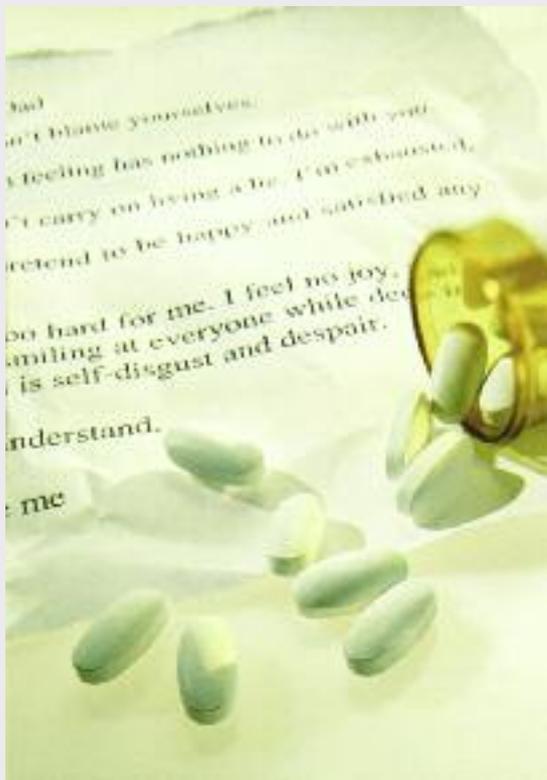


# A study of suicide notes left by children and young teens

In 2010 more people died by suicide than were killed in war, by murder, or in natural disasters. In Norway, the location of a heart-rending new study of suicide notes left by children and young teens, suicide is the second leading cause of death for this age group. We need urgently to do more to understand why so many young people are taking their own lives.

The researchers Anne Freuchen and Berit Grøholt predicted that, given their immaturity, the young authors of suicide notes would show signs of confusion. Also, because diagnoses of mental illness are lower in children and young teens, the researchers predicted that the notes would show fewer signs of inner pain compared with notes left by older teens and adults.



In *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*

In all, Freuchen and Grøholt had access to 23 suicide notes left by 18 youths (average age 14; five girls) who took their own lives between 1993 and 2004. They also interviewed the children's parents and referred to police reports. For comparison, the researchers also interviewed the parents of 24 youths who died by suicide during the same period but did not leave a note.

Analysing the notes revealed 10 themes, each of which was present in three or more of the notes: they were addressed to someone (most often parents); the author gave reasons for the suicide; they declared their love; expressed a settlement with themselves (e.g. 'it's better for me to be dead'); expressed a settlement with someone else (e.g. 'I do this for you, dad'); asked for forgiveness; expressed good wishes (e.g. 'good luck in the future'); expressed aggression (e.g. 'you bastards'); over half included instructions (e.g. 'give Peter Playstation 2'); and just under half expressed inner pain.

Contrary to their predictions, Freuchen and Grøholt said that 'the notes are coherent and do not reveal confusion or overwhelming emotions. The children and young adolescents emphasise their consciousness of what they are about to do and they take full responsibility.'

According to the parental interviews, the children and teens who left the notes had not sought help with the issues that led to their

suicide. At the same time, they had communicated their thoughts about suicide more often than those who didn't leave notes. One has to wonder why this did not trigger more effective preventive action. Similarly, three of the notes took the form of school essays, and yet none of them were acted upon by school authorities.

The fact that many of the notes conveyed declarations of love and gave explanations suggests, the researchers said, that the authors were well aware of the implications of their actions. 'These children and adolescents somehow retain their dignity,' the researchers said. 'They act like decent people do, they bear their pain alone, and even manage to take care of others by leaving detailed instructions with respect to giving away their assets.'

The researchers do not extract many practical lessons from their findings, other than calling for more research into parent-child/teen relationships in the hope of developing preventative strategies. Moreover, they cautioned that it is not possible to generalise or draw conclusions from this small sample. Another methodological limitation is that the suicide notes are from an era that pre-dates the rise of social media (which can be a source of threat, a support, and an outlet), so it's not clear how relevant insights from this study are for young people today.

## Synaesthetic sex

In *Frontiers in Psychology*

For people with synaesthesia, stimulation of one sense – or in some cases just thinking of a particular concept – triggers another kind of sensory experience. The most common form of the condition is for letters to trigger colour perceptions, but there are some truly strange variants, such as people for whom various swimming strokes trigger colours, and others who experience emotional sensations at the touch of different fabrics.

Although there are first-hand accounts in sex research that sound a lot like synaesthesia (e.g. a woman interviewed for a 1970 paper said that orgasm was accompanied by 'fuzzy blackness with red and white muted bursts'), before now psychology has failed to investigate the possibility that, for some people, sexual feelings might be the trigger for synaesthetic sensations, and to ask what the implications are for their sex lives.

For a new study, a team led by Janina Nielsen surveyed 19 synaesthetes (two men) who claimed to have sexual forms of the condition. Their answers were compared to 36 age-matched controls. The researchers also interviewed seven of the sexual synaesthetes. The average age of the participants was mid- to late thirties.

The sexual synaesthetes described different perceptual sensations for different stages of sexual activity from arousal to climax. Initial fantasy and



## Want people to trust you? Try apologising for the rain

*In Social Psychological and Personality Science*

desire triggered the colour orange for one woman. As excitement built for another participant, this went together with colours of increasing intensity. With excitement plateauing, one person described fog transformed into a wall. Orgasm was then described as the wall bursting, 'ringlike structures...in bluish-violet tones'. The final so-called resolution phase was accompanied for another participant with pink and yellow.

There's no objective way of verifying the truth of these descriptions; however, many participants experience more common forms of synaesthesia (e.g. letters to colours), which showed consistency over time when tested – usually taken as mark of authenticity.

The survey showed that the sexual synaesthetes scored higher than control participants for sexual desire and for altered states of consciousness during sex, including 'oceanic boundlessness' (feelings of derealisation and ecstasy) and 'visionary restructualisation' (hallucinations). Surprisingly perhaps, the synaesthetes also reported less sexual satisfaction than the controls. Their interview answers suggested this is because their synaesthetic experiences enrich their own sexual sensations but leave them feeling disconnected from their partner. It's all very well if sex triggers your own personal light show, but if you can't share it, well ... it must be kind of isolating.

Nielsen and her team said these results should be treated with caution. This is 'a pilot project' they said, 'providing clues for further investigation'.

If you want people to see you as trustworthy, try apologising for situations outside of your control such as the rain or a transport delay. That's the implication of a new study by researchers at Harvard Business School and Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania.

The most compelling evidence came from Alison Brooks and her colleagues' fourth and final study in which a male actor approached 65 strangers (30 women) at a train station on a rainy day to ask to borrow their mobile phone. Half the time he preceded his request with the apology: 'I'm sorry about the rain!' The rest of the time he just came straight out with his request: 'Can I borrow your cell phone?' The superfluous apology made a big difference. Forty-seven per cent of strangers offered their phone when the actor apologised for the rain, compared with 9 per cent when there was no apology.

The field study followed three laboratory experiments. In the first, 178 students thought they were playing a financial game with a partner in another room. They were told that on some rounds the computer would override their partner's decisions. Later, if their 'partner' (actually the whole thing was pre-programmed) apologised for a computer override the participants tended to rate him or her as more trustworthy and were more generous towards him or her as a result.

In a second experiment, 177 adult participants (average age 28) watched a video of a stranger approaching a flight-

delayed passenger at an airport to ask to borrow his/her mobile phone. The participants were to imagine they were the passenger and to decide how to act. If the stranger was shown apologising for the flight delay before making his request, the participants were more likely to say they'd agree to share their phone with him, as compared with a no-apology control condition, an initial conventional apology ('Hi, I'm sorry to interrupt'), or an initial neutral greeting ('Hi, how are you?').

Another experiment involved 310 adult participants imagining they were heading in the rain to meet a seller of a second-hand iPod. If they were told the seller apologised for the rain first, the participants tended to rate him as more trustworthy, likeable and empathic, as compared with a no-apology condition, an initial traditional acknowledgement ('Hi there, oh it's raining') or a neutral greeting ('Hi there').

How trustworthy are these

results? The accumulated findings from several experiments help build a convincing case, but unfortunately the field study – which had the potential to provide the most persuasive evidence – is seriously flawed. The actor apologised for the rain then asked to borrow a phone, or in the comparison condition he just asked to borrow the phone. There was no proper control condition. This means we don't know if the impact of the apology was specific to making an apology or merely an effect of uttering any kind of ice-breaker.

This is significant because past research shows how mindlessly we often act in social situations. For example, back in the late 1970s, Ellen Langer and her colleagues found that people were just as likely to give way at a photocopier if a queue-jumper uttered the nonsensical excuse 'because I need to make copies' as when he claimed 'because I'm in a rush'.



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