

Middle-aged academics are at greater suicide risk than students

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June 27, 2018



The exceptionally sad death of Malcolm Anderson at Cardiff Business School in February should serve as a warning light for universities in both the UK and further afield.

There is a high level of awareness and concern about student suicide, but it is important for every university leader, and perhaps every modern citizen, to realise that in most industrialised nations, including the UK, suicide is predominantly a risk among the middle-aged – and particularly among men in their late forties.

Anderson was reportedly in his forties, yet many of his colleagues and friends probably did not even know that that is the typical age of a suicide victim. Indeed, as someone who has done research into depression and suicide data around the world over the past few years, with my colleague Ahmed Tohamy, I have not encountered any non-expert in the field who knows this.

We do not have detailed data on all suicide deaths among university staff and students. Yet, from the Office for National Statistics, we do have precise figures for UK residents as a whole. For 20-year-olds, the annual risk of suicide death is about 1 in 10,000 among males, and 1 in

30,000 among females. For 45-year-olds, it is about 1 in 4,000 among males, and 1 in 15,000 among females. For 70-year-olds it falls back to the figures for 20-year-olds.

In other words, suicide risk is like a bell curve over most of the life course. In my view, the fact that suicide risk is 1 in 4,000 for middle-aged males is emotionally shocking and important.

What is going wrong in midlife? What might senior university managers do to help? In my judgement, simply publicising the midlife suicide pattern would be a good start. Even in a regular university corridor, the junior and senior academics armed with this knowledge could keep an eye on their middle-aged colleagues' well-being.

But the onus would fall particularly on senior managers to do so. Two books, *The Happiness Curve* by Jonathan Rauch and *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* by Kieran Setiya, should be required reading for them; both document fascinating data and interviews. By the same token, senior managers should watch out for their own feelings of midlife unhappiness and stress. Such feelings are normal.

While this month's inquest into his death heard that Anderson's suicide came after he was asked by university managers to mark 418 exam papers in 20 days, I do not believe that suicide victims are rationally choosing an appropriate course of action. Perhaps that is true for the very old with horrible illnesses; there is indeed a spike in this kind of suicide right at the end of life. Yet humans have mood swings and many people eventually recover very considerably from depressive feelings. Indeed, this might all be predominantly biological: a 2013 study in which I participated, [published in the journal PNAS](#), found that great apes, too, have a midlife psychological nadir. Most midlife suicide victims simply needed temporary support.

It is therefore wrong to take the attitude that "life is tough, and we all have to get used to that". I have heard such views expressed by older professors with comfortable lives. But today, we live in the safest, healthiest, richest era in history; the fact that people are still taking their own lives in Western countries is a sign that something is going needlessly wrong.

Although it would be hard to prove, my observation of university life since the 1970s is that it has become psychologically unhealthy and status-obsessed. When I was starting out as a lecturer there was concern about journal rankings, but most people were interested primarily in discovering important ideas and being caring teachers. There were lots of ways to rank people; there was heterogeneity in what counted as making a contribution.

Now everyone thinks they have to compete in the same narrow avenues, revolving around bibliometrics and student satisfaction scores. There is an obsession with journal names and many people feel worthless. It is almost as though we have consciously designed a system to maximise stress and fear. That is dangerous, muddle-headed and against the spirit of universities.

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If you're having suicidal thoughts or feel you need to talk to someone, a free

helpline is available round the clock in the UK on 116123 or you can email jo@samaritans.org. In the US, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255. In Australia, the crisis support service Lifeline is 13 11 14. Other international suicide helplines can be found at www.befrienders.org.