



# Four famous suicides in history and lessons learned: A narrative review

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## ABSTRACT

History can complement the scientific disciplines in teaching us about the nature of suicide. The death of Socrates, especially as described by Xenophon, suggests fear of the frailties of old age as a motive for suicide. A Platonic view implies heroism and martyrdom. Cleopatra's death and Kurt Cobain's signify the importance of losing when the stakes are high, to the extent that the potential loss is simply too great to live with. Hemingway's death provides strong evidence for a genetic role at play, coupled with various risk factors, most notably mental illness (probably bipolar mood disorder) and setting unrealistic goals.

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## 1. Introduction

Taking one's own life seems an incomprehensible proposition to most of us, but globally about 800,000 persons kill themselves each year, and undoubtedly many more attempt suicide and yet more experience suicidal thoughts and suffer attendant psychological stress. The problem has been attacked from many angles, including *inter alia*, sociological analysis, behavioral analysis, and neuroscience. All of these disciplines have yielded significant insight into this sinister condition, yet it is possible that another

discipline, history, has much to offer our understanding of the nature of suicide. The tenet of the historian, one must learn from the past, should not be dismissed readily when it comes to suicide.

An exhaustive list of famous people who have taken their own lives, from ancient times through to today, would be depressingly long. Unfortunately, such deaths cover individuals engaged in all sorts of human endeavor, including the visual arts (e.g., Vincent van Gogh and Jeanne Hébuterne), religion (Judas Iscariot), music (e.g., Bob Welch and Dalida), acting (e.g., Robyn Williams and Marilyn Monroe), sport (e.g., Yoon Ki-won and most likely Sid Barnes), writing (e.g., Nobel Laureate Yasunari Kawabata and Jean Améry), mathematics and the sciences (e.g., Alan Turing OBE FRS, father of computer science, and cryptology, and Nobel Laureate Hans Fischer), philosophy (Otto Weininger and David Stove), and military/political leadership (Cato, Adolf Hitler, Marcus Junius Brutus the Younger, Cleopatra VII Philopator and Marcus Antonius

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[Marc Antony], and possibly Emily Wilding Davison and Hannibal among many others. Roman military leaders, famous in their own time, would fall on their own sword/dagger rather than face the humiliation of defeat (e.g., Marcus Junius Brutus, Gaius Cassius Longinus [Cassius], and Cato the Younger). Suicide is an insidious beast that touches all corners of society, and its complexity, and the distinct individuality of its causes make it difficult to draw general conclusions about its nature and likelihood.

Modern research has however identified certain risk factors for suicide, including, *inter alia*, poor physical health, psychiatric disorders, psychosocial crisis, availability of means, exposure to models, genetic loading, personality characteristics (e.g., impulsivity, aggression), restricted fetal growth and perinatal circumstances, early traumatic life events, and neurobiological disturbances (e.g., serotonin dysfunction and hypothalamic-pituitary axis hyperactivity) (Hawton & van Heeringen, 2009). While such studies are of invaluable import in managing suicide in populations, it is also possible that the power of the celebrity, the famous person, can be used to connect to people and help them understand the more nuanced aspects of the condition. By considering suicide through an individual, it can be argued that a closer connection can be made than by more distant analyses at a population level (e.g., the reporting of statistics and risk factors). In short, people, by definition, personalize the situation, and closer examination of deaths from suicide may prove instructive in averting further suicides. The advantage of examining famous suicides is that more in-depth critique is likely to take place than for a non-famous person. By this I am not just referring to critique of the suicide per se, but rather the understanding of the person's life as a whole. Famous people typically live their lives on display, for better or worse, and this provides us with at least some understanding of their personality, their trials and tribulations, their medical history, and their weaknesses and strengths. In short, the lives of famous people are much better documented than those of the rest of us, and this pragmatic limitation in large part justifies my choice to focus on the famous.

A second feature of the lives of famous people that makes them useful for the study of suicide is that most often they can be seen as normal lives with the volume switch turned up. That is, events and happenings in their lives are often more exaggerated or of greater consequence. In other words, I might be stressed about losing an argument with my boss at work and consequently watching my chances of promotion fly out the window, whereas Cleopatra VII Philopator and Marc Antony had to contend with the imminent defeat of their navy and consequent loss of Cleopatra's empire, and indeed their chances of ruling the entire Roman empire, at the hands of Octavian (later known as Augustus) in the Battle of Actium.

Suicidal behavior is a very serious matter, and my choice to focus on famous persons should in no way be interpreted as a glorification of the malady, for a wretched malady is what it is. Rather, I am attempting to use the power of fame—which has been used for many other purposes, both good and bad—to gain some insight into the nature of suicide and hopefully dissuade other people from heading down the same path. The tragic loss of Kurt Cobain resonated strongly throughout the Western world and there was serious concern about so-called “copy-cat” suicides (Jobes, Berman, O'Carroll, Eastguard, & Knickmeyer, 1996; Martin & Koo, 1997), which unquestionably would not have been Kurt's wish. His suicide note made it very clear that his struggles were personal and unbearable; in no way was he condoning suicide. In an ideal world, we would learn from the suicides of famous people and thus avert further tragedies.

The definition of a famous person is arguably somewhat conjectural, especially in today's climate where Andy Warhol's 15 min of fame rings true, most notably through the plethora of so-called

“reality television” programs as well as short-lived popular music bands. Here I have taken a fairly conservative position and consider only those who have or are likely to go down in the annals of history, again, for better or worse. To this end, the very fact that I draw solely on the peer-reviewed academic literature, rather than the grey literature and the internet, serves as a failsafe check that the person is indeed “famous.” That is, academic journal articles are not written about 15-min and reality television stars. There will undoubtedly be many famous suicides that the reader will be surprised were not selected in the small group of four, but sadly the list of famous people who have taken their own lives is extensive, and the purpose of the article is to draw lessons through in-depth qualitative analysis rather than produce a comprehensive list of famous suicides.

Each case is unique, of course, but I conclude by trying to draw some generalizations on the nature of suicide among famous persons. I could have played it safe and stuck to clear-cut, indisputable cases of suicide, but I have included one, Socrates, where the question of whether or not the death was a suicide is debatable. I have done this deliberately because it brings forth some further interesting discussion points relating to the essence of suicide.

## 2. Methods

The selection of persons to include in this review is completely arbitrary, although it does to some extent reflect (i) the availability of the peer-reviewed literature on the person, (ii) my intent to represent fairly evenly different eras of history and professions of the deceased, (iii) various motivations for suicide, and (iv) suicides that are typical of certain types of suicides. I have erred on the side of including fewer individuals but providing more depth rather than a more comprehensive collection of less insightful considerations.

The method comprises more than a mere collection of historical accounts. Rather, I have adopted a hermeneutic approach to extract narrative contextualization relating to the deaths of these famous people, in a similar manner to the hermeneutic analyses of the deaths of Jim Morrison and Goethe (Holm-Hadulla & Bertolino, 2013; Holm-Hadulla, Roussel, & Hofmann, 2010). Such an approach enables more insightful account and consideration of the suicides than a mere historical account. I have adopted a narrative contextualization approach (Mar, Oatley, & Peterson, 2009) in an attempt to draw general themes and lessons from the stories of individuals.

Title, abstract, and keyword searches in Scopus, Medline, and Google Scholar were used to locate peer-reviewed articles on each of the famous people. The search was rather broad, with the search term in each case simply being the person's name and the term “suicide or suicidal or death”. “Socrates” was the only name used for Socrates, “Hemingway” was the search term for Ernest Hemingway, and “Cobain” was the term used for Kurt Cobain. No useful papers that were not already retrieved by the databases were found in the reference lists of these manuscripts. That is, the review is based solely on papers and a book retrieved from the databases.

## 3. Socrates

Given that Socrates was sentenced to death and ordered to take poisonous hemlock, it could be argued that his death is not a suicide. Socrates never committed anything to print himself. What we know of his trial and death mostly comes from the recounts of his pupil Plato in his *Apology of Socrates* and *Phaedo* (and to a lesser extent *Euthyphro* and *Crito*) (Gill, 2009; Guardini & Wrighton 2010;

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