

# Why I don't commit suicide\*

*John B. Watson*

---

## Abstract

This article, which Watson wrote after the Great Depression of 1929 and was rejected by several magazines, now comes to light for the first time after being kept for nearly a century in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The founder of behaviorism speculates about the causes of suicide before presenting the results of a survey with a sample of over 100 subjects about the reasons why they keep living despite the difficulties they encountered in life. In his opinion, the ultimate reason for the rising tide of suicides seems to lie in the crisis of values affecting modern society. Social institutions as university, business, politics, family, church or marriage, are not offering young people enough values to make life interesting for them. After this introduction, Watson shows the responses of the subjects, most of which are conventional and negative, and ends the article by proposing drastic changes in the social environment and giving two rules for those people who are suicidal. The first and most important is not to make any decisions when they are depressed, and the second is to run away for a time, looking for a new environment.

*Keywords:* behaviorism, John B. Watson, depression, suicide, social criticism.

---

## Resumen

Se trata de un artículo escrito por John B. Watson después de la Gran Depresión de 1929 que sale ahora por primera vez a la luz pública tras permanecer casi un siglo en la Biblioteca del Congreso de Washington, D.C. El fundador del conductismo especula sobre las causas del suicidio antes de ofrecer los resultados de su investigación con una muestra de más de 100 sujetos sobre las razones por las que desean seguir viviendo a pesar de las dificultades de la vida. En su opinión, la razón última del número creciente de suicidios parece residir en la crisis de valores que afecta a la sociedad moderna. Instituciones sociales como la universidad, empresa, política, familia, iglesia o matrimonio, no están ofreciendo a la juventud valores suficientes como para hacerles interesante la vida. Tras esta introducción, Watson presenta las respuestas de los sujetos, en su mayoría convencionales y negativas, y concluye con dos normas para las

\* Typescript stored in the John B. Watson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and published with the permission of the copyright owners.

personas que están al borde del suicidio. La primera y más importante es no tomar ninguna decisión cuando están deprimidas; la segunda, trasladarse a otro lugar por algún tiempo para encontrar un nuevo medio ambiente.

*Palabras clave:* conductismo, John B. Watson, depresión, suicidio, crítica social.

More people in the United States committed suicide in 1931 than died from typhoid fever, small pox, whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever and diphtheria. There were twice as many suicides in the same year as deaths from all accidents in mines and quarries, machinery, railroads, and street cars – over twice as many suicides as homicide, active as our gunmen are in this prohibition era.

The figures for 1932 are not complete, but apparently there will be at least a 6% increase over 1931. If the same increase in the suicide rate goes on while at the same time death from all other diseases goes steadily down, suicide may sometime lead the death rate. Even now it is approximately 13<sup>th</sup> on the list of causes of death.

I believe that suicide is a disease – a psychological disease – coming from certain social causes. I believe, too, that most of the lives that have been lost from this cause could have been saved if each of the unfortunate individuals had had opportunity to go over his case with a competent psychologist or psychiatrist.

What is it in the daily setting of our homes that leads people to take their own lives? The three depression years? That has been contributory – people who have lost money have committed suicide – even in great numbers. The daily papers are full of such tragic events. But to have lost money, once you must have had money, and therefore been of enough standing to be noticed by the newspapers if you committed suicide. Suicide due to financial losses has been over-emphasized. The trend of deaths from suicides has gone steadily upward now for almost a decade. It was high even in the prosperous years of 1926, '27 and '28. Causes deeper than financial losses are responsible.

It is interesting to note that suicide is not an old man's disease. Considerably more than 1/3 of the total deaths from this cause are between the ages of 25 and 44 years. From 35 to 54 years the distribution is greatest, but there are almost as many deaths from ages 35 to 44 years as from 45 to 54 years. It is thus in the early prime of life, and before the onset of old age, that we see the largest number of suicides. As a check upon this, consider the fact that in university life a man does not become a full professor until he is 40.

It has been my belief for a long time that society today is not offering to its members enough values of an interesting kind to make people who are in a jam for any reason want to take the trouble to live. Especially is this true of the younger generation. We have in the past few decades been building a different kind of youth.

Behaviorism has done what it could to further the youth movement. It has been the friend of youth – demanding that he be freed from the traditional bondage of home – from undue attachments to parents – and that he be taught to face himself, his own weakness – freed from self adulation, self pity, and dependencies of social heritage. We have tried to teach him to find himself in battling with and in overcoming his environment. But I am afraid we have overlooked one thing. We haven't changed the world to receive these new individuals. This was one of the important things I overlooked in trying to raise my own youngsters solely along behavioristic lines. I could raise them beautifully as long as I had them home – could shut out the outside world. But the world they had to enter at 3 or 4 years of age was not a behavioristic world. They had to mingle with a world which has a social heritage many millions of years old. To help counterbalance their behavioristic home training I sent them to the most conventional schools I could find.

But the young men and women of today entering the hard baked business and social world are not prepared for it. They have grown soft in college where they have paraded new freedom that was not backed up in college deeds. I think this is the fault of college and not of the youth. College ought to be made an environment like that of the outside world – tempered possibly, but similar. The student should meet the problems there he will meet in later life. Why shouldn't every lad earn his way through college by organized effort of some kind? Wouldn't it be infinitely better for his morale and preparation for life outside college if he did some farming, typesetting, bookkeeping, playing in the band, writing poetry or essays or advertisements instead of loafing, partying and studying Latin, Greek and mathematics? Can one sound psychological reason be advanced for studying Latin or Greek or mathematics beyond fractions and percentages unless on is to become a specialist of some kind?

At any rate, when he comes out of college today, he finds first that business is not seeking him, he can't get a job, or if he does manage to get one he finds that most office boys never become presidents of their companies. He finds that it takes a long time to make even \$50.00 per week, which is about the smallest sum he can afford to marry on, or even run a small apartment and join a very modest club. He becomes discouraged and loses his guts and his sense of humor. If he goes into scientific work, it takes him even longer to make an established reputation in research. If he enters medicine, he does not finish his internship and get ready to go out on his own much before 30. The youth economic future is not rosy. He has no craftsman guild to enter as his ancestors had. He has to drift from place to place knocking at every commercial door for any kind of a job. I confess I am pretty much discouraged with and for the youth today. His lack of responsibility, craftsmanship, his lack of ability to clean up his tools after the job is done and his lack of perseverance seem to me to become more apparent every day. He just will not work as hard as his father and grandfather worked.

Again, I don't blame him, but college and the rest of his environment that we have created for him. There is something awry. The youth is not ready for the world. The world is not ready for the youth.

Not only does the present vocational environment fail to capture the emotions of the youths, but also equally lacking in stimulating values are other situations that formerly were thrilling.

For example, one's country. Patriotism used to fire the youth – one's flag, one's soil, one's institutions were old catchwords to call the youth to arms. They have all been deflated in value. It would be very hard in this country to drum up an army today. Napoleon, if he came to life, couldn't muster a regiment if he marched from California to New York. We know now that Washington could tell a lie and probably did tell many. Our financial and business geniuses no longer occupy the shrines they did. Hero worship is dead. Everybody and everything is looked upon with suspicion.

The family fails to offer the stable protecting, encouraging environment it once did. Years ago in the South to be born a John Doe 3<sup>rd</sup> of Charleston gave you entry into every home south of the Mason & Dixon Line. To be born a John Doe 3<sup>rd</sup> of Boston equally admitted you to every worthwhile home in the North. Family was something to fight for – it was worthwhile to be a member of a family. Today family pride is all gone. Of the family names in America that date back in history possibly not more than six mean anything to more than five people out of a hundred you meet on the street. Economic conditions call for the break-up and scattering of the family.

Probably more important than the loss of pride in family, is the emotional weakening of inner family ties. Mother love, father love, brotherly and sisterly love – even parental love – all have been deflated or are in process of being deflated. I do not decry this. In the end I think it will work for more independent and more happy lives, but the facts remain that these values have weakened for the young man and young women entering maturity today, and nothing has come to replace them.

Formerly the church offered a stable and enduring set of values. Those values were based both upon hope of reward and fear of punishment, the most potent two factors for the control of behavior psychologists know. There is no escaping the fact that to the modern youth these values have been weakened. One needs only to cite Mexico, Spain, Russia and Germany to see what the youth movement does to religious values once it gets under way.

Again marriage is not looked forward to as the blissful – “and they lived happily afterwards” era, it formerly was. Youngsters today know more about sex and marriage theoretically and practically at 20 than their parents and grandparents will ever know. There is little unsophistication today – little illusion about marriage – little glamour. The divorce records prove this. There is passion, yes, and always will be, but it leads less often to marriage than it used to. At least one marriage in five ends in the divorce court. From

the standpoint of happiness in and faithfulness to the relationship, probably four out of five go wrong. One of the rarest things I've found in many years of talks with husbands and wives is to find a happy marriage – it is almost as rare a find as a happy child.

So the glamorous values youngsters once looked forward to of marrying and settling down pass out. They marry, but they do not settle down except to a kind of armed neutrality – with frequent skirmishes, incited by jealousy, economic pressure, the insistent demands of children, and a generally untidy home.

Apparently, of all the values held out to the youth only one has suffered little or no deflation – Science. I have often wondered why it is not more appealing to youths in colleges. There is real romance in Chemistry, Physics and Biology. Your researches stand as monuments of truth until a better and wider research of your own or some other modifies that truth.

In the field of industrial science, one sometimes hears of the Frankenstein nature of science, but I notice that every time science creates a better motor car, refrigerator, air conditioner, vacuum cleaner, or cold cream, people rush to buy and enjoy them. Certainly in the medical field, no one complains of too much science or too rapid control of disease. Hopes of the ultimate control of all disease constantly buoy us up and research in medicine during the past 100 years reads like a romance. Apart from science and medicine, though, there has come in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a tarnishing of the golden guerdons that are offered to the oncoming young adults.

Let us contrast the life ahead of the college graduate today with the life ahead of the American Indian (before civilization smothered him) when he reached the age of tribal initiation or even with that of the mid-Victorian youth as he reached man's estate.

The Indian lad was all in a dither about becoming a recognized man of the tribe; he had to learn to shoot, ride, swim, hunt, track, look for signs, fight his enemies – every day was a new day fraught with danger. From the time he made his first coup he had to become more and more adept with shooting, hunting, tracking, riding. He didn't have to do chores. He worked with tribal leaders every day. It was his opportunity to be a hero any day. His life was full of danger. He was thrilled by activity every day. He lost himself completely in the vicissitudes of every day life. Not to become skilled in offensive and defensive warfare or the hunt, meant an early death. The only similar lines open to the American lad today is becoming an advanced boy scout or taking two weeks in the reserve officers' training course in the summer. Possibly one out of 100,000 has a chance to compete in athletics, tennis, golf and sailing events. Ninety-nine out of a hundred lads have to hunt a job at not over \$25.00 per week. Work six days per week and from eight to nine hours per day. Even a long English weekend is denied him.

And the Victorian youth? About two years ago I started to write an article under the title "Mid-Victorian Days are Just Ahead." Somehow I never finished it largely

because a deeper study of youth convinced me that it isn't true. Victorian days put the emphasis on deportment, pretty graces, verbalizations and niceties of living. The young lad reaching man's estate had to know about boxing, be a god shot, know how to ride to hounds, and above all to deport himself properly and to dress superbly. Life was "refined" but it was infinite in its demands. He had to learn how to turn pretty compliments – he had to know what ties, collars and vests to wear. His valet or barber had to have hours to devote to him. Life was engrossing with its niceties. Today, the modern youth, with due allowance for exceptions, has no politeness. It is not needed. It is old fashioned. He is not even polite to his mother. The arts of compliments and chivalry are lost. He calls his girl "kid". He doesn't even get up when his mother or his sweetheart enters a room. He says, "Aw, nuts" "Oh, Gee". He would call anybody a sissy or a fairy who was polite to women or older people. Being versed in literature of the drama is a sign of senility. He knows his Broadway favorites, movie stars, jazz singers and radio crooners and good dance orchestras. It is his right to be entertained – not entertaining. He doesn't have to do anything about it. It has to be done for him. He only acts as critic and dares anyone to make him laugh. Social, intellectual and artistic life ahead means nothing -certainly are not stimuli for persistent attempts to improve one's self.

#### WHAT MAKES US GO ON LIVING?

But in spite of such contrast in values something drives most of us on to live. Can we find out what the values are that keep us carrying on when the road is rough – what values are replacing those that offered interesting thrills to the youths of bygone days? And if we find them, isn't there some way to dramatize them for the discouraged adults 25 to 35 years of age?

I tried to get an answer to this question by asking a large group of people to give me a fifty word statement on: "Why I don't commit suicide." This is the letter.

Professor Horace M. Kallen  
The New School for Social Research  
New York City

Dear Professor Kallen:

I think we are not giving the youths of the country quite enough encouragement. They can't get jobs now and they haven't very much in front of them in black and white to make them want to go on living. I am preparing a popular article for *Cosmopolitan* on "Why I Don't Commit Suicide". I want to build up the positive side quite strongly.

I am asking a group of friends to write me a fifty word personal statement on "Why I Don't Commit Suicide". Will you do this for me.

Sincerely yours,

John B. Watson

I wanted to see just how people would find words to answer this request. Almost everyone I wrote to sent in the fifty words – some of them wrote pages. One university professor read the letter to more than a hundred of his undergraduate students and had each write on the subject. One of the professors of psychiatry used the letter as a basis for a two hour discussion with his whole staff and sent me a transcript of it. The subject has become much under public discussion lately and everyone wrote earnestly and seriously. In all, I received only two refusals. One from the President of a mid-western university who said he had never thought about suicide and therefore didn't care to write about it. Another from a woman professor in a great Eastern Woman's College who said that on advice of the psychiatrist she could not let her students work upon the problem.

Here, for the first time, I believe, in history, is set down the motives of why people go on living. The figure to the right of each motive shows the number of times it appeared in the answers.

Enjoy life too much even it means fighting against odds. (32)	Have to be insane to commit suicide. (4)
Love of family – of use to family – wife, husband, children. (32)	Wouldn't so gratify my enemies. (4)
It is a cowardly thing to do – not good sportsmanship – not playing the game. (24)	Never entered my head. (3)
Religious reasons. (21)	Just an optimist. (3)
Too interested in what may happen just around the corner. (20)	"Instinct" to live. (3)
Too much hope and interest in future. (17)	Wouldn't profit me anything. (3)
Sense of duty or responsibility to others – can't let friends down. (15)	World offers too much beauty and hope and excitement. (2)
Too good health. (14)	Suicide is revenging yourself on someone – won't take revenge this way. (2)
So many things I still want to do. (14)	Seen too much suicide in life to ever want to take that way out. (2)

Afraid I won't succeed in act. (12)	Soon as life gets tedious I shall leave before the final curtain. (2)
Love of work and ambitions. (11)	Have tried it but not successfully – this experience cured me of trying it again. (2)
No reason for not committing suicide. (11)	My life insurance in husband's name. (1)
Afraid of death. (8)	My son's future. (1)
Overpowering curiosity about future. (6)	Want to see things through. (1)
Afraid there is no future life. This is only one we know. (6)	Living is just a habit. (1)
Don't like to make a mess. (5)	We are tricked into being born, tricked into staying alive. (1)
See no reason why I shouldn't go on living (5)	I am remote enough from life to see it as a comedy. (1)

I don't know how the reader may feel about these reasons for living. Most of them to me are quite conventional and just a bit disappointing. The majority of the reasons, for example, 3, 4, 7, 10, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 are purely negative reasons. They advance no real or positive value for continuing life. Indeed in the majority of the letters received there is a marked cynicism about life. Again if it had not been for the undergraduates and the junior league groups #1, 2 and 5 which do set forth positive reasons, would not have been nearly so heavily weighted.

Doesn't this chart show more convincingly than I can tell it that we have neglected to prepare the world for the reception of oncoming adults? That we have in no way put into parables, precepts and examples reason for living. That we have been neglecting to make the stranger (the young adult) welcome in our midst? Indeed neglecting even to shape the world so as to make a standard place for starting him off.

It does seem to me that something is demanded of the solons who now control the universe if we want to continue to have society, to continue to have a group of happy, successful, hopeful young men and women.

1. Can't colleges and universities be modernized – and below the college the fitting school and grammar schools which now only “prepare” for college – to shape the youth for life – vocationally, artistically, practically? We hear a lot about what is being done to college curricula. What is being done is all too slow. Few people, unless they have had an opportunity to break away, realize how mediaeval the college was even ten years ago. It was definitely of the middle ages.

2. Can't business once more be made glamorous – are all the old buccaneers and pirates who used to make industry as interesting as war, dead forever? While they

made life unsafe for the weak they were not petty grafters – they were builders. If we only had fifty men of their strength of character in business today who would turn aside just a little from making money, to making their business a haven for training and encouraging their oncoming employees, business could become a stabilizing psychological factor for sanity. It is the working with and alongside the big fellow in business that gives the kick to the youngster.

3. Why can't political life be purified to the point where it is an honor to be an alderman or to belong to a state legislature? In certain periods in the history of both Greece and Rome it was an honor to belong to the governing classes. If politics ever became respectable here it would fire the imagination of our youths. Give them an abiding value in life to cling to. In Great Britain political life is much cleaner – it makes a much more attractive career. For the less ambitious minded, Civil Services in England affords a graft-free dependable honorable career. This service alone if half the romance were built around it as is built around the Marines would take care of thousands of people who are seeking modest careers. It is honorable enough but there is no romance about it.

4. I've always had the hope that marriage could once again be made enduringly romantic. The task is herculean though and will require a generation or two of training.

One might go on with all the institutions from street cleaning to bridge building, from dirt farming to orchid raising and show that society has allowed moss to grow around them. Nobody today is trying to sell the youth the romance that lies in every kind of honest work.

#### HOW CAN WE HELP THE MAN THINKING OF SUICIDE TODAY

Meanwhile Suicide goes on. The changes in an environment that I have discussed will come slowly. The suicide problem, if possible, must be handed quickly. *What steps can we take now to help the two thousand people who will take their own lives this month?* I think everyone will admit that suicide takes place nearly always when the individual is in a *depressed* state. The non-psychologically trained public does not understand depressions. When they are in one they believe quite naturally that the state will endure forever. The public does not understand either that everyone no matter how normal falls into a depression at one time or another often even when there is no marked change in the environment. Not understanding that depressed states are transitory the individual becomes frightened, panicky – he wants to do something quickly to get out of it.

May I make the point here that the depressions are the easiest forms of psychological illnesses to recover from. Even those afflicted with deep depressions usually get well. These depressed states in normal people endure usually for only a short time. In a day or a week we snap out of them and life still holds its old promise. And you will

snap out of them even if no one dies and leaves you a million dollars or offers you a \$25,000 a year job! When in a depression if you can only hang fast to this thought! *Never make a serious decision – whether to change jobs, change husband or wife, or to commit suicide, when a depression state is on. Wait until you pull out of it – and you will pull out of it. When you are in the clear again, re-examine your promises and your conclusions and see if you still want to make the change.*

I feel quite sure that if any good psychiatrist or psychologist had got hold of the 23 thousand who committed suicide in 1932 and had been given opportunity and time to get over the above simple rule of conduct, many thousands of lives would have been saved. I think the point of view to subscribe to cannot be put more clearly than in the letter I received from one of America's most capable psychiatrists. "I have two sets of reasons why I do not commit suicide. The first is biologic. I know as Psychiatrist that suicide notions occur in ninety-nine out of one hundred cases while people are depressed. I always say to myself during these periods – 'In a short time you will no longer feel depressed and will again have your normal joy in living. ' My second reason is that I have a conviction that life if lived dramatically is too exciting and interesting and stimulating a business to want to stop it until the game has been played out. I have a belief that around every corner may lie interesting adventure and when suicide notions occur I recall the series of dramatic experiences that have made life glamorous to me. I also remember that these experiences have come frequently when the future looked the darkest." There are times when conditions may justify suicide, lingering, incurable illness, where one's whole family would have to be sacrificed. There are a few others. But there are very few conditions where suicide is a happy way out of one's family.

Finally, the best, sanest and quickest acting thought I can give to one brooding over taking his own life is this. Run away for a week, a month or a year. There is no psychological medicine so potent in all the wide world as a *new environment*. You say you can't run away and leave those dependent upon you? – but that is just what you are planning to do – run away to a place where you can't come back. My advice again to you if you can't get to someone you trust to talk the matter over with – (any everyone should have someone to unburden to) is run away even if you have to hitch-hike your way – beg for food – join a hobo army. Work on a farm. Make the biggest change in your environment you can. If you are a white collar man earn your hand-out by manual labor. Leave a letter for your loved ones saying you are going away to get sane again but go away and don't come back until the depressed state is over and courage again oozes from your elbows. And every time you conquer a depressed state, you are just that much stronger – just that much more psychologically normal. Conquer a few such states and you become forever immune from the germs of suicide.