

Studies provide the evidence of efficacy required before arriving at sound conclusions and applying those conclusions to real life situations. Even though many scientific studies seem to entail a lot of work to prove what you already knew, I am still convinced of their necessity. We live in an information age and we seem to require all the more convincing and fact-checking, as we float around in an ocean of informational bits. It is especially useful when scientists put a theory to the test in a simple, low cost fashion, as this makes it more possible for the study to be easily replicated.

I recently read one of those cleanly designed studies that reinforced common sense. The recently released international study of close to 2,000 people in Brazil, India, Sri Lanka, Iran and China was aimed at reducing the occurrence of a repeated attempt at suicide. The Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention director, Professor Diego De Leo, hoped to show that informational and educational interventions during emergency room visits by those who had attempted suicide could instill recognition of risk factors and coping skills. Most importantly, the intervention group followed up with phone calls and visits over the next 18 months. The researchers hoped that staying in touch would reduce the chance of repeated attempts to commit suicide. They succeeded!

It makes sense that people who want to end their lives do not feel connected to others or see their own value as a member of society. It also makes sense that reaching out to those in need could make a difference, rather than expecting the isolated one to initiate conversation and meaningful communication.

The World Health Organization estimated in 2002 (I know that seems a long time ago but it takes awhile to gather these statistics.) that some 877,000 deaths were attributed to suicide. (This is, most likely, an underestimate). Just imagine the loss to families, to towns, to professions, to society as a whole. We are social beings at heart and we cannot ignore that basic need without such serious consequences as loneliness, depression, isolation and suicide.

Whenever I think of the social needs and origins of the human race, I think of a little monkey I met one day. I have never forgotten his little face, full of yearning for companionship and gratitude for being touched. I was in the midst of my one and only visit to Florida and was making my way through the usual tourist stops of Busch Gardens, orange groves, alligator farms and, on this particular day, a monkey zoo. We were warned against bringing any and food into the premises, as some monkeys were loose and would certainly approach anyone with food. We were then herded into a viewing arena overlooking a pond, where we were entertained by swimming monkeys. They seemed so wild and natural; it was not offensive to observe them and their comical antics. It was on my way out of the zoo, that I realized my participation in something cruel.

While walking down a corridor, I was flanked on one side by large cages set a safe distance away from the public behind bars and glass and the other side with small cages (small as in bird cages) holding individual animals. I had just observed one of the zoo-keepers talking to a gorilla. He was sort of showing off that he was at ease with this very large mammal by talking sweet talk and offering his index finger through the bars to say hello. One minute the man smiling and the next he was sweating with concern as the ape held onto his finger with a grip tighter than foreseen or comfortable. It was scary to

watch and while I certainly felt concern for the man being gripped, I also could not help but be curious about and fascinated with the one doing the gripping. Was he intending harm or did he just not know his own strength? I was just about to run for help for the man, when the gorilla let go.

At that point, I wanted to get out of this place as quickly as I could, but I had to pass by those little individual cages with small monkeys looking so lonely. Having just witnessed this scene of potential harm did not change or influence my mind when I was confronted by the sad eyes of a little, solitary monkey, in a little cage. I'm telling you, those eyes talked! They said, "Please touch me." It seems like an easy request but I didn't know these animals. Not wanting to be scratched or bitten, I reached in with my index finger as far away as possible from the animal's mouth or hands. I scratched its back. In response, the monkey lifted its elbow, exposing its underarm. Was I mistaken? Was this little being so clearly communicating with me? I scratched under its arm. The other armpit was offered. Next, the neck was stretched out toward the edge of the cage. The head was turned. The chin was lifted. Eventually, I had to run out or I would find myself opening cages. I have never forgotten that little guy and how lonely he was and how wrong it was to keep him in isolation.

The monkey did not have any choice. He could not let himself out. He was kept as a slave.

When people feel isolated, they can feel as though they do not have many or any choices. The bleak circumstances and feelings blind them to options.

If you know of someone who is sad or who lives alone or is going through difficult times, reach out to him or her. Give that person a call. Send a card. Stop by for a visit. You may just save a life.

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