

How Not to Kill Yourself: A Portrait of the Suicidal Mind

Author: Clancy Martin

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Clancy Martin, a professor of philosophy at the University of Missouri-Kansas City, offers up an honest memoir, sharing his knowledge of and lived experiences of attempted suicides and regular suicidal ideation that influence his nuanced and insightful understanding of the topic. In a raw and detailed review of his life and struggle with depression, alcoholism, and suicide, Martin shares intimate accounts of his experiences with suicide, which inform nine techniques and approaches to life that have recently helped him on the journey of living life with suicidal ideation. While Martin does not identify these nine techniques until his final chapter, the preceding text is full of thoughtful discourse and introspection, providing readers with a personal yet critically informed review of the topic of suicide. *How Not to Kill Yourself: A Portrait of the Suicidal Mind* (Martin, 2023) is a powerful piece that addresses a difficult yet important topic with sincerity, honesty, and, in the end, hope.

Having attempted suicide ten times throughout his lifetime, Martin's intended audience for this book is those who may have attempted suicide, who struggle with the desire and thoughts of suicide, and who may have been impacted by the loss of a loved one due to suicide. While the intended audience may be anyone, this may be identified as a text by student affairs professionals to read for professional development and learning. In light of the recent death by suicide of Dr. Antoinette "Bonnie" Candia-Bailey, Vice President of Student Affairs at Lincoln University of Missouri, student affairs professionals may turn to this text to develop a better understanding of suicide and mental health to provide support to colleagues and students alike. Should

professionals consider reading this text as a professional development opportunity (individually or with one's office), they may wish to read the following review and reflect on some of the questions posed at the end to determine if this is the right text for said intended learning and development.

To summarize this text broadly, Martin (2023) separates his memoir into three sections, "Suicidal Tendencies," "One Foot in the Grave," and "The Long Road Back." Beyond these sections, Martin provides two appendices, the first being "Tools for Crisis" and the second being "In Case of Emergency: Interviews on Staying Alive," in support of those who may be considering suicide. Martin identifies the appendices should the reader need more immediate support than working through the entire text in his note to the reader at the start of the book. Throughout the entire book, Martin weaves together accounts of his lived experiences, personal reflections, and a vast amount of research and literary references to the topic of suicide. While being deeply personal, Martin centers an academic and philosophical review of suicide, referencing both philosophers and writers who discuss the topic and integrating modern references to public figures who have died by suicide, such as Anthony Bourdain, Jasmine Waters, and Robin Williams. Holistically, this text provides a look inside the mind of someone who has experienced suicidal ideation regularly throughout life while also identifying reasons to live another day and encouraging mental health support.

Within his first section, "Suicidal Tendencies," Martin reviews the suicidal mind by recounting some of his earliest and most prominent suicide attempts, recounting this all to share that managing one's mental health and suicidal thinking can be an ongoing and arduous process. This account leads Martin to address the notion of a death drive, the ongoing feeling or desire to take one's life, along with a similar yet different experience, parasuicidal behavior, where individuals may not attempt suicide but engage in dangerous and self-harming/destructive behavior that ultimately leads to an untimely death. From this identification of a death drive and parasuicidal behavior, Martin then identifies the human choice of suicide and, after much philosophical contemplation, indicates that one should wait to kill oneself tomorrow because maybe, after getting through the day, things won't be as difficult tomorrow. Martin concludes this section with an identification of his experience with his parents and how some of his father's challenges with mental health and suicide influenced some of his life.

Within his second section, "One Foot in the Grave," Martin recounts his experiences both as an alcoholic and as someone with consistent suicidal ideation and numerous suicide attempts, likening the two experiences to both being forms of addiction. Next, Martin reviews suicide from a philosophical lens as well as through the works of several authors known for writing and discussing suicide within their works.

These chapters bring forward Martin's academic knowledge of the topic and provide the reader with a tremendous amount of opportunity for reflection on the topic. To conclude this section, Martin then recounts another experience in the psych ward after one of his attempted suicides and depicts the difficulty of being in treatment for his suicidal ideation and attempt.

Within his third and final section, "The Long Road Back," Martin starts to reveal to the reader his more recent journey of living life with less suicidal ideation. Martin reflects on the similarities between his journey as an alcoholic and his journey with his suicidal thinking. Within his reflection, Martin uses the phrase, "relapse is a part of recovery" from Alcoholics Anonymous to identify that this journey is not perfect and that one needs to find the strategies and supports to move forward in life while experiencing depression and suicidal ideation. Next, revisiting the theme from when he discussed his experience with his father earlier in the book, Martin identifies how his role as a father influences his life and journey with suicide. Martin shares how his family has been impacted by his suicidal ideation and how they are a support to help him move forward in life with less suicidal ideation. Then, in his final chapter, Martin concludes this piece with nine techniques and approaches to life that have recently helped him on the journey of living life and not killing himself. Martin (2023) ends the chapter addressing the reader, saying, "...look at us, here we are together, we made it. We don't want to die, just yet." (p. 333)

As a note, while one may wish for the nine techniques to be listed here in this review, the preceding text provides a tremendous amount of context and insight into how these help Martin to live life with less suicide. So in keeping with Martin's format, I will not provide those techniques in this review.

Upon finishing this book and reflecting on the content, it dawned on me how heavy this text was for me to read, but how the heaviness of this text may land differently for different people. For example, for those who struggle with suicidal ideation or alcoholism, this text may feel heavy given the in-depth account of another person's struggle with these experiences or addictions, as Martin would identify them. The similarity in accounts may remind people of their struggles and hardships, which may be difficult and heavy to sit with and process. Conversely, for those who do not struggle with either suicidal ideation or alcoholism/addiction, this raw and authentic account of these experiences may be quite challenging to sit with and process. For those who have not experienced this throughout their lives, reading Martin's story may be incredibly eye-opening to this lived experience. Whether or not you have experienced something similar, this book is a heavy and emotional read. This is not to dissuade folx from reading this book because it is incredibly well-written and meaningful, but it is a note of pause for those who may consider reading it, as it can

bring up a lot of emotions for someone to engage with. Given this, I have developed some questions for consideration before choosing to use this book for learning and development for personal or office use, which are included below.

Questions for Personal Use:

- Do I have personal experiences with suicidal ideation or alcoholism that may be triggered by reading this text?
 - If yes, do I have the capacity and support to engage with a possibly triggering text for the purpose of professional development relevant to this topic?
- Do I have a supportive person or network with whom I may process the complex emotions/ideas that arise while reading this text?
- Do I have the cognitive capacity to critically reflect on this topic within my work, understanding that this text is not explicitly geared towards higher education/student affairs professionals?

Questions for Office Use:

- What is the intended learning outcome of having my/our office engage with this text as a professional development opportunity, and how can we ensure that the facilitation of this office read works toward those objectives?
- How do I/we ensure that using this as an office read is suitable and appropriate for all of the individuals within our team and does not compromise individuals' well-being?
 - Can this be optional? Can we have people reflect on the Personal Use questions before deciding to participate?
- Who is facilitating this office read and discussion, and what support may be necessary/beneficial to provide throughout this professional development experience?

In conclusion, *How Not to Kill Yourself: A Portrait of the Suicidal Mind* by Clancy Martin is a very powerful and poignant read that may be suitable for use for learning and development regarding the experience of depression and suicidal ideation/suicide. Depression and suicidal ideation impact our peers, our college students, and maybe even ourselves, so this is a meaningful book to read and to get a better understanding of the topic or not to feel so alone if one does feel this way too.