

Persuasion

I could feel my stomach begin to drop right through my intestines. This was it, the call I knew I'd get someday. The only way to avoid it was to not come in each Tuesday morning to work on our Crisis Hotline. "Any problem under the sun," was our motto. But suicide was not an easy one.

"What do you mean, 'I'd like to end it right now.'" I asked the woman. I wanted to be sure of what she was telling me.

"I can't take it any more," she said.

"Well, you got this far today. You called me ... this number ... you wanted to do that, right?"

"I don't know what I want."

"I mean, you're reaching out. That's a sign that something inside you wants to talk it out," I said. "Something inside you doesn't want you to hurt yourself."

"It would be just so quick and easy. Then it would be over," she said.

"When it's over, you can't do anything more about it. It's really over."

"But I want it to be over," she said. "It hurts so much."

"Can you tell me about it," I asked, trying to get the awful thing out of her, bring it out into the light where perhaps it would become less frightening, less strong, less deadly.

Across the large table that served as a desk for 2 or three volunteers I saw my shift mate Iris looking at me with a pained expression on her face. She knew what I was dealing with. She could tell from just my side of the conversation. It would probably not be beneficial to have her join the phone call. I knew that, but I wanted to reach out and pull her along with me, only because I felt so alone on this. I faced the prospect of

someone taking their life because I wasn't up to the task of stopping them.

When my brain began to work better, I grabbed a pencil. "Suicide" I wrote on a small pad of paper and passed it to her. She looked down at my one word note and then stared up at me. Her head nodded once and she tore the slip of paper off the top of the pad, stood up and walked it over to our supervisor Alan at his little desk under the stairway. She came back to the table, sat down and began to write a series of words and phrases on the pad's newly exposed top sheet. She passed these suggestions back to me.

But I was in conversation with the woman and did not want to miss a single word she had to say or especially any sounds I might hear in the background.

"I have my late husband's gun," she said.

"Is it a rifle or a pistol?" I asked. I wanted to know how complicated it might be for her to shoot herself.

"A pistol," she said. "A revolver. Six shot. I've fired it. He insisted I learn to use it and took me to a firing range 3 or 4 times."

I wondered how many potential suicides had not taken place because the person couldn't figure out how to use the gun ... to load the clip or open the cylinder or snap off the safety. This would not be such a case. She definitely knew how to use the gun.

This situation could go either way. On one hand I might talk her out of what she was planning. She could then assure me she would be OK, hang up and go on with her life. On the other hand, she might be holding the gun as we spoke. The call could end abruptly when I heard a gasp or a whimper followed by a final explosion and the clatter of the phone as it dropped from her hand to the floor.

Because of our strict confidentiality policy, I couldn't send an ambulance or police car to her location to intervene. Our small band of volunteers had never allowed Caller ID on our phones, so we never knew who was calling or from where. Because of our web page on the Internet, we sometimes received

calls from other parts of the world. Alan liked to take calls from France and practice his French. Calls from elsewhere in the U.S. were more likely. The woman might be calling from another coast rather than another country. But most likely she lived less than fifty miles from our office.

In any case, she was calling because she wanted help, but she could not easily admit it. She wanted to tell me why she felt so terrible, but beyond my words of kindness she was not ready to accept the professional help she needed. I suggested a number of times she see a professional, but on each occasion she rebuffed my offer to help her connect with someone. Eventually, she appeared to become tired of speaking with me.

"I need to get off the phone," she said. "I don't think I'm going to kill myself today."

"Where's the gun?" I asked.

"I'm holding it."

I was silent for a moment, letting her statement echo in the void so she would hear it.

"You haven't told me your name," I said, as gently as I could.

"Charlotte. My name is Charlotte."

"Charlotte, I can send emergency help," I said. "You could give the gun to them so you won't be tempted to use it in the future."

"How can you send anyone?" she asked.

"You're not supposed to know where I'm calling from."

"I don't," I said. "I was going to ask you to tell me your name and address."

"I certainly don't feel comfortable giving you that information. I don't even know you."

"You just told me you wanted to kill yourself," I said. "You know me well enough to tell me that."

She laughed softly. "I guess that's true." She took a deep breath. "Will they take me to a psych ward?"

"Probably. You haven't told me where you are, so it may depend upon the town you live in."

"My God," she said, "the neighbors will talk when they see the ambulance pull up outside."

I swallowed hard. I had to tell her the truth.

"It won't be an ambulance," I said. "It will probably be the police."

"The police? Oh, no. I don't want that."

"You have to understand," I said. "When I call your town's emergency services, I'll have to tell them you have a gun. That's only fair to them."

"For God's sake, I wouldn't shoot them."

"I'm sure that's true, but they won't want to take any chances. They'll send the police."

I looked over to Iris as I spoke into the phone. She sat across the table, listening. She shrugged her shoulders and mouthed the word, "Depends." I guessed she meant it depended upon the town, the police department, maybe a lot of things.

"Look," Charlotte said. "I'm not going to hurt myself. I'll put Jack's gun back in the closet."

"But what if you're tempted in the future? What if you start to feel bad and ..."

"I'll call his brother. Larry will come and get it and we won't have to worry about it again."

"Yes, but today you were depressed enough to *almost* commit suicide. You may feel that way again. You could step in front of a train. Don't you want to get help? So that you don't do anything like this again and risk your life? Don't you want to feel safe? To know you're doing what you can to avoid hurting yourself? Getting rid of the gun? Going to the hospital to spend a few days and getting some help?"

There was silence on the other end of the phone. It seemed to last a long time.

"So, if a policeman comes to the door," she said, "how will this work? Do I just hand him the gun?"

"I wouldn't have it in my hands," I said. "Just to be careful, you could place it on a table and point to it so he could see you weren't ready to fire it."

Alan had come from his desk and sat down at the end of our large work table. He'd been listening intently but had not made any comment. Now he rose and came to stand next to me. In a loud whisper he said, "Have her put the gun outside the door." Then he went back and sat at the end of the table.

"Are you in an apartment or a house?" I asked Charlotte.

"An apartment in Bedford," she said, naming a nearby town."

"Is there a hallway outside your door and is it very busy?"

"Yes, there's a hall. No it's not busy."

"After I call the police, you could place the gun outside your door so the policeman will get it when he arrives, before he meets you."

"You mean on the floor?"

"Yes, I guess. Why not?"

"This is complicated," she said.

"Not so much," I replied. "Stay with me, Charlotte. We're going to get through this."

"It would just be so easy to end it here," she said.

"No, it wouldn't," I said.

There was silence on her end.

"Charlotte, talk to me."

"This doesn't feel good. They're going to come and take me away. They'll keep me tied up in a hospital forever. I don't want this. I want it to end. I want it to be over, God damn it.

I thought I heard a metallic click.

"This is far easier," she said with a whimper.

"No! No," I said. "Maybe easy for you, but it would be terrible for other people. Charlotte, it would be terrible for me."

"For you?"

"I don't want to go home later today knowing I couldn't help to save your life. That I wasn't good enough to talk you out of it."

"How did this get to be about you?" she asked.

Iris looked across the desk at me with the same question in her eyes.

"What does it matter?" I said. "Whatever it takes. Please don't hurt yourself, Charlotte. Please don't, for my sake."

"OK, OK," she said. "Stop whining. I'm not going to do it."

"Please let me send emergency services to your apartment. Tell me you'll go with them to the hospital." I could hear the whining in my voice, but I didn't care.

"OK, OK." She gave me her last name. I had to ask for her address, which she gave up in pieces. It was like pulling teeth.

"And your phone number in case we get cut off?"

"We won't. You don't need it."

"Charlotte is your name and phone number in the book?"

"Yes ... it is."

"And you're going to make me look it up?" I said with a laugh.

I wrote everything down and passed it to Iris, who began to dial the Bedford Police Department. I told Charlotte my co-worker was calling the "emergency services," so I could stay on the phone with her.

"I'm OK now," she said. "I'm going to hang up."

"No, please," I said. "Let's stay on the phone together until they get to you."

"Really," she said, "it's not necessary. I'm OK."

"I want to speak to the person who comes for you," I said. "I need to do that."

"Why?" she said.

"Just so I can tell them to be as helpful to you as possible."

"Well ... let me lay the phone down so I can put the pistol out in the hallway."

There was a click and then a dial tone. She'd hung up on me.

I immediately dialed her number and got a busy signal. Maybe she was trying to call me. I hung up, explained to Iris what had happened and we waited a few minutes for Charlotte to call us. I watched the clock and gave her three minutes ... what seemed a very long three minutes. Then I dialed her number

again. It rang four times and went to message recording.

On another phone Iris was already calling the Bedford Police Department. She reached the same desk sergeant she had spoken to a few minutes before and explained we'd lost contact ... hopefully temporarily ... with Charlotte.

Iris looked over at me. "He's radioing the information to the cop who's just climbing the stairs to the apartment," she said.

I rang Charlotte's number and again got the message record facility.

I waited a minute or two and then dialed again..

"Hello?"

"Charlotte, is that you?"

"I didn't mean to hang up on you," she said. "I wasn't thinking."

"That's OK. Are you all right?"

"No. I think I just shot a policeman."

"What!? Didn't you put the pistol outside the door?"

"That's what I was doing," she said. "I opened the door and he was standing there. He grabbed for the gun and it went off."

"Open the door and see how bad off he is."

"Oh, no. He's pretty upset. He's shouting and swearing like there's no tomorrow. I'm afraid he'll hurt me."

Iris now stood at her desk, the phone cupped in her ear. I waved to her. "Charlotte accidentally shot the policeman," I said.

"I know. But she missed," said Iris. "He pushed the gun down and the bullet just missed his foot. Have her open the door."

"Charlotte," I said. "Open the door. You didn't shoot him. The policeman is OK. "

"Then why is he yelling?" she said

"I don't know. Maybe you just winged him."

Iris shook her head from side to side.

"He's not hurt," she said, softly."

"If the policeman will promise to not scare the hell out of Charlotte," I said to Iris, "I'll have her open the door."

"Tell her," said Iris, "to open the door. Now."

"Charlotte, did the policeman stop yelling? You can open the door now. He won't hurt you."

Alan jumped up from his end of the table.

"Where the hell is the gun?" he shouted. Alarm was written across his face. "Who has the damned gun?"

I hadn't thought about where the gun was. When the policeman grabbed the weapon and it went off a few minutes ago, I guess I assumed he took possession of it. But I didn't know that to be true for sure.

"Charlotte," I said. "Charlotte?"

The clunk of the phone on a hard surface was followed by the creak of door hinges opening. Then a loud bang. And another and another.

Charlotte opened the door with her late husband's revolver still in her hand and the policeman shot her. Two in the chest and one in the face, exactly as he had been trained to do with someone who had shot at him a few minutes before. He said later she was aiming at him and was about to squeeze the trigger. I can't believe that. Most days I don't believe it. Some days I wonder.

The end result was what she intended when she pulled her late husband's gun from the closet. That was before her moment of hesitation when she decided to call our Hotline for help. Before I convinced her life could get better, life could go on. Before I talked her into accepting help rather than take her word she was OK. Before I persuaded her the policeman wouldn't hurt her.

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