OUT OF OPTIONS

This book tackles an area of adolescent behavior that presents a significant challenge for parents, teachers, and professionals the world over. Although much has been written on the topic of adolescent suicide, we see continued high rates throughout industrialized nations. The overlap between suicidal behaviors and other forms of serious risk-taking is a relatively new avenue of research and gives insight into the motivations of some adolescents. The cognitive model developed and evaluated in this book provides further insight into the progression from early problems faced by young people to the serious outcomes of suicide and risk-taking. The model allows us to suggest points of intervention for young people and to demonstrate that, although there are overlapping features between suicidal and risk-taking behaviors, attempts to intervene would target different problem areas for suicidal adolescents than for risk-taking adolescents.

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OUT OF OPTIONS
A Cognitive Model of Adolescent Suicide and Risk-Taking

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University of Queensland

LEN DALGLIESH
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University of Adelaide
We dedicate this book to the many young people who helped us by talking to us so openly at difficult times in their lives and by answering questionnaires that were undoubtedly tedious for them. Many of these young people espoused a hope that by helping us they would in some way be helping other adolescents. Although we know that movement in this area is slow, there are currently projects and interventions in progress that may see this help eventuate for some young people.

Special thanks must also go to Kate Lilley, whose work in proofreading and editing made the final draft of this manuscript possible.
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Preface

This book focuses on one aspect of youth suicide prevention – the role of cognitive mediators in the suicide process in young people. We have written it because the topics we investigated may contribute to practical interventions to prevent suicide in young people.

Most current suicide prevention programs are educational in nature. They try to give young people knowledge about where to go for services and how to recognize symptoms in themselves and their peers. This is a reasonable approach, since one of the barriers to young people’s accessing adequate care, and one of the causes of delays in treatment, is the lack of this information (Sawyer, Kosky, & Graetz, 2000).

However, even with this knowledge, it is not clear whether a young person who is seriously suicidal and in a crisis can utilize it to avoid the adverse outcome. To do so requires appropriate cognitive skills, the ability to work out what is important and what is not, and the capacity to apply the knowledge to solve the looming problems. We have focused on this point in the suicidal process. We have tried to assess whether there are cognitive skills that are deficient in
suicidal young people and, if so, whether any clear implications for clinical programs in suicide prevention flow from this.

For a previous work, one of us sat in on juvenile court hearings to listen to the stories of the young people who faced the courts (Sofronoff, 1999). Another of us surveyed young people who were in detention centers (Kosky, Sawyer, and Gowland, 1990). We were both struck by the evident similarities between young people who take serious risks and those who were seriously suicidal. Serious risk-taking youths often end up in the juvenile justice system. Seriously suicidal youths often end up in the mental health system. Both have potentially fatal outcomes.

Our clinical impressions and research findings about young people in the criminal justice system have, of course, been noted by others, notably Lewis (1988). Taking as our focus the processes that lead to these adverse outcomes, we have tried, in this book, to measure the differences and similarities in the cognitive capacities involved in the decisions made by young people who are attracted to suicide or risk-taking. Again, we have done this with a view to developing a practical approach to suicide prevention.

We begin the book with an overview of risk factors in suicide and risk-taking youth. Then we follow with a qualitative comparison of young people who do not exhibit suicidal or risk-taking tendencies with those who are suicidal or risk takers. We then use the findings from these comparisons to derive a hypothesis about the cognitive skills of young people who make up the target groups.

We attempt to fit these findings into a model of suicide in which we posit cognitive processes as mediators between pathological emotional states and adverse outcomes. From this we develop a number of practical suggestions in relation to prevention. Of course, we are not yet in a position to be able to test these possibilities insofar as they can prevent suicide; that would require further research and perhaps other people to follow up our ideas.