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## Examining the role of consciousness and the Absurd in suicide

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# Examining the role of consciousness and the Absurd in suicide

Alexandra Azevedo, University of Rhode Island

## Why Suicide?

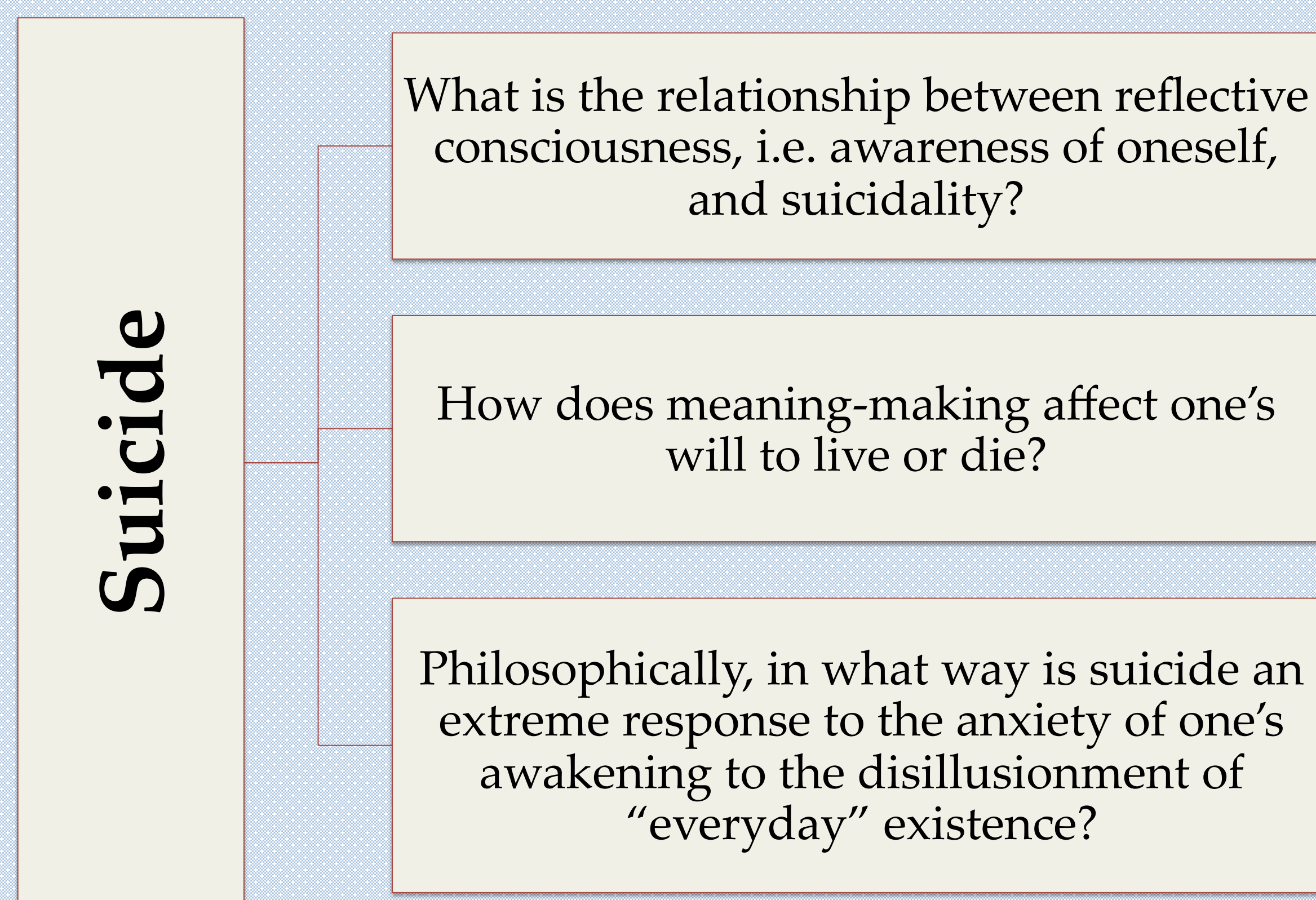
Suicide is a devastating event that prematurely ends an individual's life and dramatically affects families, communities, and entire nations. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 804,000 suicide deaths occurred in 2012—approximately one person every 40 seconds.<sup>1</sup> More lives were lost to suicide than homicide, war, natural disaster, and all other violent deaths combined worldwide. Yet, in many cultures, it is one of the most silenced and stigmatized deaths. Historically, attitudes toward suicide have painted it as something that is not to be openly discussed, as if suicide—and death in general—is a dark fog that will pollute one's thoughts. Bringing a topic as serious as suicide to the foreground of academia is a necessary step for awareness, education, and prevention. If anything, people need to talk about it now more than ever.

## Why Philosophy?

Suicide is more than just a public health concern. Its symptoms are not solely related to pathology (see Figure 1). Each suicide represents a distinct coalescence of factors, akin to a personalized puzzle. Pieces join in different quantities and configurations, constructing a unique image each time. No two suicides are the same. The purpose of this research is to explore suicide at its most basic level—through the experience as a conscious being. It is considerably the only commonality that all suicides share. The French writer and philosopher Albert Camus argues that “everything begins with consciousness and nothing is worth anything except through it.”<sup>2</sup> Approaching suicide in such a way, from a deeply philosophical basis, may help us reach a conception that transcends contemporary cultural attitudes. Although this type of focus is grounded in the subjective and can therefore never be tangibly pinpointed, I believe it most authentically reveals that suicidality can never be relegated to a definitive set of compartmentalized objective conditions.

## The Philosophical Problem

Suicide is a philosophical and social problem, with a primary existential anxiety at its heart. The purpose of life—that is, whether or not there is a meaningful reason for our existence—is the fundamental question of existentialism. Suicide seemingly contradicts our will to survive. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus initiates one of the most decisive philosophical conversations on suicide. When we realize the futility of seeking meaning in an absurd, indifferent universe, we begin to wonder if there was ever a will to survive in the first place. Through this framework, I have established the following three inquiries into suicide:

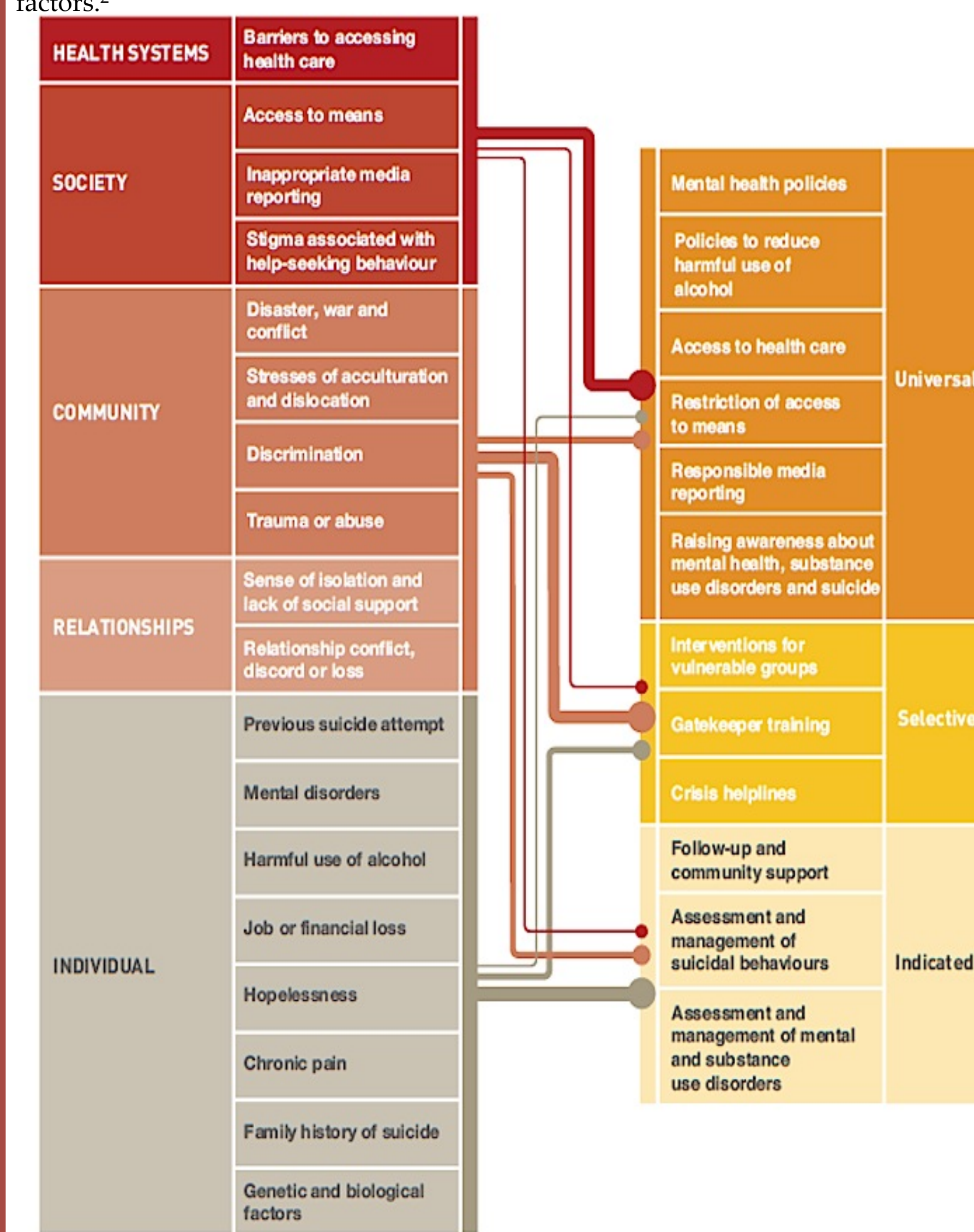


There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.

~ Albert Camus ~



Figure 1. This chart from the World Health Organization (WHO) clearly illustrates the weight that individualized risk factors have on suicide. Lines to the relevant interventions reflect the relative importance at different levels for each area of risk factors.<sup>2</sup>



I engaged in service learning as a Samaritans volunteer in order to complement my conceptual analysis of the impact of authentically discussing the feelings of anxiety and despair involved in suicidality.

## The Absurd Conclusion

Recognition of the Absurd first leads to a distinct feeling of nearly paralyzing anxiety, for we no longer understand our grounding in the universe. Yet, it can also bring about a liberation, in which we become the agents of our own purpose. To some, this persistence despite the Absurd constitutes a more fulfilling existence. To others, the anxiety becomes a despair that saturates reflective consciousness. They become so consumed by it that death no longer symbolizes the end of existence, rather the end of their psychological pain. Suicide amounts to a confession that the absurdity of our existence is too much. To the truly suicidal, it becomes the final and only option to escape the Absurd. However, Camus argues that suicide consumes the Absurd in the same death.<sup>2</sup> The act of prematurely ending one's life is an extreme response that becomes absurd in itself. It is critical to first acknowledge that a person who dies by suicide is a *person*. The suicide is secondary. Weighing suicidality as a conscious experience illuminates the intrapsychic and interpersonal relationships involved. The range of factors present in suicide—biological, biochemical, cultural, sociological, interpersonal, intrapsychic, logical, philosophical, conscious, and unconscious—only serve as placeholders for what cannot be said about suicide as a subjective experience.<sup>4</sup> We do our best by examining as much of the puzzle as we can. The more we understand about one particular piece, the clearer the entire image becomes. Every advance in research allows more light into the window of the suicidal mind.

## Resources

1. *Preventing Suicide: A Global Imperative*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014. Print.
2. Camus, A. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. New York: Penguin Classics, 1995. Print.
3. The Samaritans of Rhode Island Suicide Prevention Resource Center. Providence, RI. <<http://samaritansri.org/>>.
4. Shneidman, E. *The Suicidal Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.

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