

Symbolic Suicide
In Perspective
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Many, perhaps even most, people have indulged in behavior that is self-destructive or potentially so. Breaking the speed limit, overeating, smoking, overindulgence in alcohol or other drugs, and compulsive gambling are all examples of activities that are not necessarily life-threatening but that, carried to the extreme, threaten the individual's well-being and carry with them the risk of death. Often unconscious and not necessarily fatal, such behaviors have been referred to by some psychologists as symbolic suicide, as opposed to actual suicide, which does result in physical death.

What causes people to commit symbolic suicide? Various schools of psychology suggest different explanations. One view is that symbolic suicide is a symptom of low self-esteem. The obese person compares himself to others and deems himself worthless. Who could love or respect someone who looks so gross? To compensate for his feelings of inferiority he eats a large pizza with sausage and extra cheese and a quart of ice cream, all washed down with a few quarts of beer. Having done so, he feels guilt and deepened self-loathing, driving him to even further gluttony. Why does he indulge in such a vicious cycle? Because it is reassuring to most people to have their expectations, whether good or bad, confirmed. It is very unsettling to be too surprised, even pleasantly. So the fat person keeps eating, and the compulsive gambler continues to bet until he loses, because that is what he expects to happen. If the fat person were to wake up thin, by some miracle, or the compulsive gambler win a fortune, both would feel extremely anxious because of their perceived inferiority and unworthiness.

Of course, not all risk-taking behavior should be classified a symbolic suicide. An occasional binge or death-defying gamble on the part of a person with a healthy and realistic self-concept may serve merely to relieve boredom and add needed variety to an otherwise routine existence. It is not the behavior, but the individual's reaction to the behavior, that determines whether or not he is committing symbolic suicide or merely having fun.