

# The Cruelty of April: Suicide in Spring

*April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.*  
T.S. Eliot<sup>1</sup>



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**T**he epigraph for this column is from *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot's postmodern poem that, in part, reflects his experience of the destruction of an entire way of living and a generation of young men in the wake of the First World War. The terrible contemporary toll suicide has taken on veterans and the active-duty military makes it easy to forget that suicide is an inveterate and disturbing aftermath of all wars.<sup>2</sup>

There is a profound and elemental connection in the human mind between Spring and renewal. In almost every culture and religion, across nearly every historical epoch and location, Spring is associated with themes of growth, returning life, light, and hope. On a more prosaic modern level, almost all of us—especially those in Northern climates—look forward to warmer weather, more time spent outdoors, and the simple joys of seeing perennials return in the garden and birds nest in blooming trees.

It is a paradox of human life that suicide is more common in the season of rebirth than in the season of decline. The bare trees, freezing temperatures, and icy darkness that accompany winter in much of the world inherently lead us to contemplate our mortality. The counterintuitive finding that individuals, many of them veterans, take their own lives more often in Spring creates a cognitive dissonance to be explored in this editorial.

As a layperson, I too assumed there were more suicides in winter, especially around the holidays when the expectation of belonging, privilege, and pleasure painfully reminds the alienated, lonely, homeless, and ailing of all they lack and all they have lost. As a psychiatric intern, I anticipated that the inpatient US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) ward where I was training would empty with the arrival of nicer weather. Instead, I was mystified when the opposite occurred

and the unit was overflowing with manic and suicidal patients.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention National Center for Health Statistics ranked suicide by month from 1999 to 2010. Contrary to popular belief, more suicides occurred in late Spring and Summer than any other season.<sup>3</sup> A 2023 study of systematic reviews of seasonal variation in mood disorders, suicide risk, and health care utilization found that suicide was 11% to 23% higher, suicide attempts resulting in emergency department visits showed an increase of 1.2% to 1.7%, and hospital admissions for mania rose 7.4% to 16.0% in Spring and Summer, compared with Fall and Winter.<sup>4</sup> This general population finding is also seen in veteran and military cohorts. A recent study analyzed VA and US Department of Defense (DoD) data from 133,867 veteran suicides from 2001 to 2021. Results showed that veteran suicides were highest in Summer.<sup>5</sup>

The rise of suicide in the Spring was first observed in the 17th century and has been the object of scientific study for at least 3 decades. That research has produced several different hypotheses from a variety of disciplines, none of which are conclusive as of this writing. Cho and Lee note that the phrase “Spring fever” is a much more serious illness for those with a predisposition or diagnosis of unipolar or bipolar disorder than the quotidian irritant that afflicts those without affective disorders.<sup>6</sup> In residency, I learned that longer exposure to light in Spring led to an imbalance in neurotransmitters that triggered manias. This is a simplistic version of the complex circadian interactions of temperature, climate, light, and other environmental variables causing dysregulation or misalignment of our natural biological cycles and those of nature proposed by chronobiologists.<sup>7</sup>

Sociological and criminal justice scholars underscore that an increase in temperature may exacerbate violent tendencies, especially in older males—a demographic profile more frequently found in veterans—and those already prone to acting out their frustrations with firearms.<sup>8</sup> Psychologists have hypothesized that individuals with depressions persevere through Winter by telling themselves they will feel relief in the Spring. Too often the coming of Spring brings not reprieve but a deadly combination of deeper mental desperation coupled with the release from winter lassitude that energizes the now hopeless person to put ideation into action.<sup>4,9</sup> The elevation of suicide rates in Spring is likely multidetermined with all these putative causes contributing in different variations to every individual who tragically dies by suicide.

Yet despite decades of public education, this dangerous fiction stubbornly persists in the educated public and even among many health care professionals, in part due to misguided media. For years, the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) has made busting this myth of holiday suicides in the media an organizational initiative. A 2023 APPC survey found that 4 of 5 Americans picked December as the month when suicide rates were highest. The organization has been analyzing holiday-related media reports for decades; those results show some improvement, with the most recent analysis of media reports somewhat better and 40% communicating erroneous information.<sup>10</sup>

APPC believes the opinion that suicide is more common around the holidays will persuade those struggling with an exacerbation of a mental health condition or an acute crisis to attempt or die by suicide, believing it to be a reasonable social response. While recognizing there is a real risk of such contagion behavior, I believe the reverse problem is more concerning. As I observed during my

internship, the acceptance of the fiction that everyone is happy in Spring may even blind health care professionals from detecting clues that patients and even our loved ones are contemplating suicide. Our relief that Winter has passed and enjoyment of Spring activities can fool us into believing everyone else is also feeling fine and doing well and miss an opportunity to intervene and treat mania or depression to save a life—the medical manifestation of renewal.

### Disclaimer

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of *Federal Practitioner*, Frontline Medical Communications Inc., the US Government, or any of its agencies.

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