ESCAPING THE SELF CONSUMES
REGULATORY RESOURCES: A
SELF-REGULATORY MODEL
OF SUICIDE

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Human life is often regarded as a precious opportunity, a divine gift, a sacred
obligation, or a lucky and beautiful source of joy. Consistent with this positive
outlook, most human beings - like most animals - cling to life tenaciously and fight
to preserve and prolong it to the utmost. Yet a small slice of humanity seems to
hold a very different attitude, to the extent of willingly and actively trying to end
their own lives. Why?

Many theories have been put forward to account for suicide, including
Freud's theory of inward aggression (Freud, 1916; cf. Farmer, 1987), sociological
theories regarding social integration (Durkheim, 1897/1963), and biological theories
on the role of hormones (Lester, 1988) and neurochemical processes (e.g., low
serotonin, see Golomb, 1998). Baumeister (1990b) proposed a social psychological
account of suicide, in which he argued that suicide attempts are the result of a desire
to alleviate aversive self-awareness. According to this view, reducing self-awareness
eases the negative affect and self-blame that stem from unfavorable self-comparisons.
However, a further consequence of reducing self-awareness is the removal of
inhibitions that normally constrain suicidal behaviors (among other things). Thus,
suicide attempts may result from escalating efforts to lessen painful self-awareness.

Emotion has long been recognized as an important factor in suicide (e.g.,
Kovacs, Beck, & Weissman, 1975). Although the exact nature of the relationship
between negative affect and suicide has been difficult to identify, it is clear that
negative affect or at least anhedonia is involved (see Baumeister, 1990b; Fawcett, Busch, Jacobs, Kravitz, & Fogg, 1997). The role of attention is also decisive; in fact, attending to the discrepancy between current achievements or conditions and personal standards is often what sets off the negative affect and distress (see Carver & Scheier, 1981; Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Thus, attention and affect are crucial variables in Baumeister's suicide model, as these variables combine to create a state of aversive self-awareness from which the unhappy person tries to escape.

If people could manage to regulate their attentional processes or emotional states, they might be able to alleviate this aversive state with means less drastic than suicide. Unfortunately, however, the very attempt to regulate attention and emotion may deplete some resources that could otherwise be used to exit the suicide spiral. The purpose of this chapter is to combine escape theory with a resource model of self-regulation to clarify the causal processes that lead to suicide.

Recent works on self-regulation have begun to incorporate resource models (e.g., Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998; Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Vohs & Heatherton, 1999). The central idea is that attempts to change or otherwise regulate the self's thoughts, emotions, impulses, behaviors, and performances consume some common resource that is then depleted afterward. This state of ego depletion entails an impairment in volition: the depleted self is less able to regulate itself, is more passive, and less able to exert volition in any other sphere (such as making choices or taking responsibility). When people attempt to escape from the self, their initial efforts may focus on trying to alter their emotional states or reduce the high awareness of personal failures and inadequacies. These attempts to regulate attention and emotion may deplete the limited resource, leaving one more vulnerable to suicide.

ESCAPE MODEL

Escape theory focuses on the social psychological factors that motivate suicide, emphasizing the role of unfavorable self-comparisons. Baumeister (1990b) delineated a stepwise model of escape. The process starts with some event that produces or makes salient a discrepancy between one's goals or expectations and one's actual current state. Falling short of important personal standards triggers feelings of self-blame and creates doubts about the attainment of future goals, resulting in internal, global, and stable attributions for negative events. Attributing failure to the self heightens self-awareness, thereby making salient the discrepancy between current states and personal goals. Furthermore, self-blame and heightened self-awareness are unpleasant states that generate intense negative affect. Heightened self-awareness in conjunction with self-directed negative affect is an acutely unpleasant state from which people want to escape.

To reduce negative affect and aversive self-attention, people engage in a process of cognitive deconstruction, which involves narrowing attentional focus to relatively concrete, meaningless, nonevaluative stimuli and thereby cutting off the high levels of meaningful interpretation that give rise to self-evaluation and emotion (Baumeister, 1990a; Vallacher & Wegner, 1987). Cognitive deconstruction is marked by an orientation to the present, an awareness of physical sensations and concrete stimuli (to the neglect of higher-order, complex, and meaningful thoughts), and an emphasis on proximal goals. There are both affective and attentional