



**What happens when someone responds to your Website with a suicide note on an email?
Education writer RUSSELL BOYLE tells his story**

Tom's EMAIL ANGUISH

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Reader response to articles on my education commentary Website is usually polite, often interesting and sometimes thought provoking. But I was shocked by and unprepared for the suicidal response that my article on bullying in schools drew from one particular reader.

"Hi," the reader wrote, "my name is Tom. I live in Europe. Yesterday, I visited your Website. I found it most interesting. I completely agree with your commentary on bullying in schools, especially your statement that the long-term effects of bullying are disastrous, ranging from major psychological problems to suicide.

"All my life I have been mentally and physically bullied, because I was the odd one out, the little fat kid. One day the bullying stopped when I turned around and broke the nose of one of the bullies. Well, the physical bullying stopped but the mental anguish remains.

"Now, at 17 years of age, I like to write poetry. It helps me to express my feelings, my anger, without hurting others. I am no longer fat. Some people tell me I am good looking. So when you're bullied it all comes down to the way you look rather than the way you are.

"I believe, deep down inside, that I

don't belong here. I think I was never really meant to be. My whole life has been a mistake, and the only way out is death. I've thought about taking pills or of slitting my wrists, but what stops me is that I know my parents love me and need me and that I love them.

"I have nothing more to say, except to ask you for advice on how to get these crazy thoughts out of my head, and how to silence the little voices that are telling me to kill myself.

"Maybe it wasn't just the bullying; perhaps it was everything else."

Was Tom's email a genuine plea for help from a reader experiencing suicidal thoughts or was his confronting message a mere hoax, written by a prankster with malicious intent? If the message was genuine, and I suspected that it was, then what did Tom mean by 'everything else'? I shuddered at the thought and reflected on how grief stricken I would be if Tom were my son.

I decided to share the email with a close friend. She quickly emailed her view back to me. "The message is genuine," she said. "You must respond to Tom's cry for help."

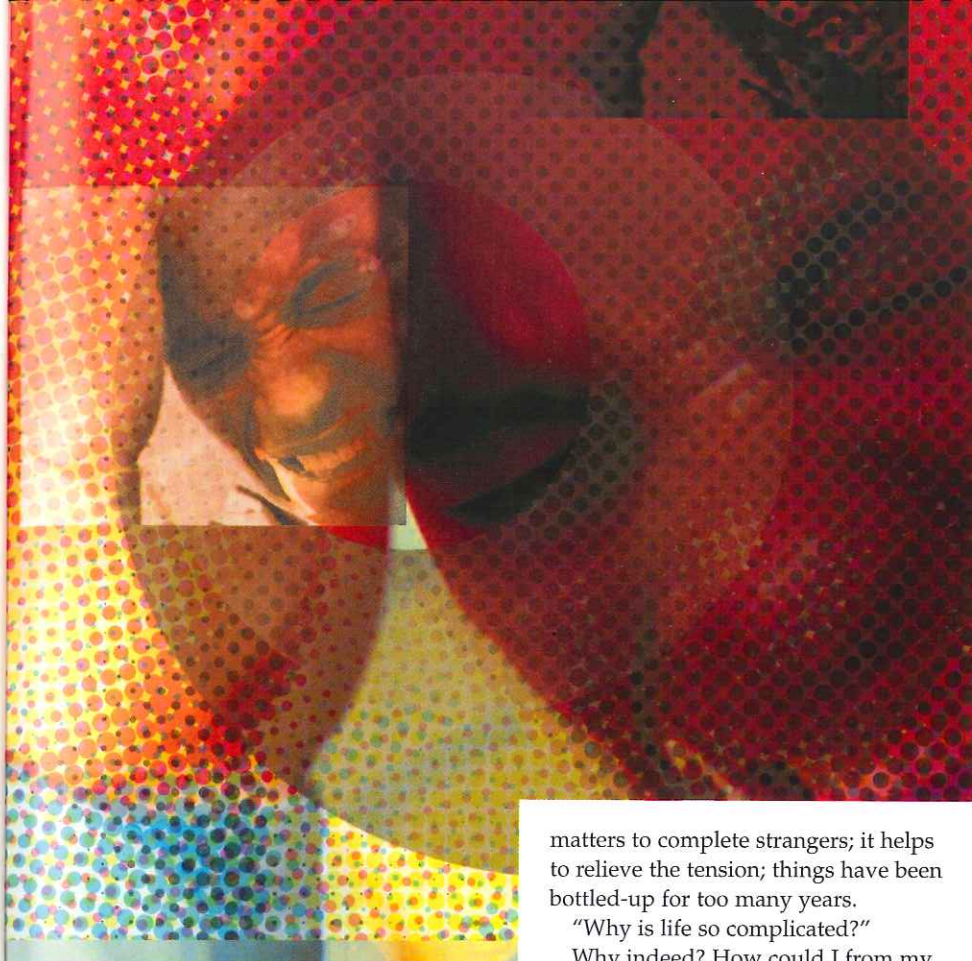
I agonised over the content of my reply. I drafted several responses only to reject each one. I then emailed a copy

of Tom's letter, together with a request for advice, to a Melbourne professional who specialises in adolescent health. After two nights with no answer from Melbourne, I sensed I could wait no longer. My conscience demanded I write to Tom even though I felt I lacked the requisite skills. I sent him the following email:

"Hello Tom," I said, "voices in my head often tell me what I should and should not do. Sometimes I listen to these voices, at other times I choose to ignore them. I think you should ignore all voices that preach self-harm and concentrate instead on the voices of love. There can be little in life that is more precious than the love of family.

"Do you feel able to speak to your parents with the same honesty and frankness that you have used in your email to me? If you can, Tom, then I strongly urge you to do so. The love that binds you and your parents together may well be the healing force you need.

"I also feel you should seek professional help. I think you need to speak with a psychologist, someone with experience in helping people in your situation. Is there a youth help-line in your country? Is there a counsellor at your school or workplace? I think you



would benefit from speaking with someone about your problems. I encourage you to act on this advice.

"Take care, Tom. Life is precious. Please don't throw it away."

The next morning, I found another message from Tom in my email inbox.

"Hi, it's Tom again. Thank you for replying to my email.

"I can speak freely with my parents, but I choose not to tell them everything; they would be unable to cope with the truth about my past. I have confided to some degree in my college tutor. I also told a few friends about my problems only to discover that things became worse after those whom I thought I could trust spread vicious rumours about me.

"As well as being bullied as a young boy at school, I was sexually abused by a male cousin who is four years older than me. I cannot tell my parents about the sexual abuse, as I fear it would break their hearts. I love my parents deeply. I regard them as the best of all possible parents. Telling them the truth would do more harm than good.

"Although the sexual abuse ceased some years ago, I continue to see my cousin on most days and so find it difficult to confide in those around me. I find it easier to speak about these

matters to complete strangers; it helps to relieve the tension; things have been bottled-up for too many years.

"Why is life so complicated?"

Why indeed? How could I from my computer on the other side of the world from where Tom sat at his, help to soothe his torment and diminish his pain? I decided I could not afford to equivocate. I sent Tom the following terse reply:

"Dear Tom," I said, "you must speak with someone who is trained to assist young people like yourself. Perhaps you could ask your tutor or college administrators for a referral to a psychologist. I urge you to act on my advice."

I have received no further email messages from Tom. I hope he is well. I fear for his mental state and for his physical health.

*Sometimes it's all
too much to say aloud
The sound's a shroud
the meanings crowd
Sometimes the words
are painful to the ear
They disappear
When nothing's clear ...*

Janis Ian

Russell Boyle is a professional writer, speaker, teacher, commentator and consultant. An anthology of his writings may be found on the Internet at <http://www.russell-boyle.com>



ADDENDUM

Physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse can each trigger suicidal feelings in people whether they are young or old, rich or poor, male or female. Professional help is readily available from counsellors, doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers. Telephone crisis lines provide help at any hour of the day or night. In Australia, Lifeline (131114) and Caring - your crisis line (136169) provide free counselling over the telephone.

WEBSITES THAT CAN HELP:

THE SAMARITANS ONLINE COUNSELLING SERVICE:

Confidential, non judgmental Email response within 24 hours for those in despair. www.samaritans.org/sams.html/emailsup.htm

KIDS HELP LINE:

Australian kid's counselling service, 24 hour phone lines, information on issues like bullying, and counselling over the web between 3pm and 9pm weekdays (EST) and via email.

www.kidshelp.com.au/

LIFELINE'S YOUTH SUICIDE

PREVENTION PROGRAM:

contacts for phone counselling, coping advice for teens and friends and family. www.lifeline.org.au/connect/HomePag.htm

MAKE A NOISE:

NSW youth issues site run by young people.

<http://makeanoise.yisp.org.au/minds/default.htm>