

# Is Suicide a Free Choice or a False Choice?

By [John M. Grohol, Psy.D.](#)



Is suicide a free choice, like choosing to do the laundry today, or to watch TV?

Or is the act of suicide more of a *false* choice — the illusion of choice, with none of the freedom we typically associate with the word?

Some people may feel this is semantics — not worth the time to [discuss](#). But given some of the ridiculous things that have been written about suicide in the past week, I feel like it's an important point to examine and understand.

Suicide is not a choice in any meaningful sense of the word. Here's why.

I don't know who Matt Walsh is, other than some guy who blogs for a living. But he recently wrote a blog entry entitled, "Robin Williams didn't die from a disease, he died from his choice."<sup>1</sup>

*First, suicide does not claim anyone against their will. No matter how depressed you are, you never have to make that choice. That choice.*

In his follow-up rebuttal post to critics, he said:

*There is no doubt that suicide, by definition, is a willful act. If it wasn't, it wouldn't be suicide. It is a choice. That's why we call it suicide. Suicide: the intentional taking of one's life. [...]*

[http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at\\_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at\\_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=2&at\\_tot=4](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=2&at_tot=4)

*Many intelligent folks have pointed out that suicide is a choice, but one made by a mind submerged in an unspeakable darkness. Suicide is a choice, but one chosen under great duress. To these people, let me offer this stipulation: of course. Yes. I never said otherwise.*

*But ALL destructive choices are made under these circumstances. ALL. Every single one. The more destructive the choice, the more troubled the mind.*

Wow, that's quite the leap of logic there. So I guess Matt Walsh is saying that if you choose to eat every day at McDonald's — a destructive choice to your body — you have a troubled mind. If you choose to not exercise today, you must be cray-cray.

All murderers must also be crazy, by Matt Walsh's definition, because they all have made a destructive choice. However, most murderers actually are not mentally ill.

So we show this last part of reasoning by Walsh is patently false on the face of it. People do make destructive choices in their lives every day, and it has nothing to do with a person having a "troubled mind" or being under "great duress."

## **Did Robin Williams Make a Choice?**

Which brings us to Robin Williams and his tragic suicide. Walsh argues it wasn't depression — or his anxiety, or his recent Parkinson's diagnosis — that led him to suicide. It was simply his choice.

Which brings me to one of my [favorite statements of all time about suicide](#):

***Suicide is not chosen; it happens  
when pain exceeds  
resources for coping with pain.***

*That's all it's about. You are not a bad person, or crazy, or weak, or flawed, because you feel suicidal. It doesn't even mean that you really want to die — it only means that you have more pain than you can cope with right now. If I start piling weights on your shoulders, you will eventually collapse if I add enough weights... no matter how much you want to remain standing. Willpower has nothing to do with it. Of course you would cheer yourself up, if you could.*

[http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at\\_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at\\_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=2&at\\_tot=4](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=2&at_tot=4)

I'm sure Walsh is an intelligent guy. But he's not a mental health professional or a behavioral scientist. And from what I can tell, he's not much of a philosopher either.

Because in all of Walsh's arguments, he's missing a key component of the definition of "choice" – "to select **freely** and after consideration."

The key word there is "freely." Did Robin Williams — or does anyone really — *freely* choose suicide? Or put another way, **did he have free will in which to choose suicide?**

## What Do We Mean 'To Freely Choose?'

Professor of psychiatry Ron Pies, M.D. has articulated a convenient way to distinguish an act of free will versus other kinds of acts:<sup>2</sup>

[... A] person may be said to act freely to just the extent that three threshold criteria are fulfilled:

1. *The act in question is not coerced; imposed by some outside force or authority; impelled by overwhelming emotional turmoil; or hindered in a significant way;*
2. *The act is intentional (rational and purposive); and*
3. *The act is subjectively consistent with the person's wishes at the time and is experienced as "free".*

Let's examine the act of suicide under this definition then...

1. While suicide is not coerced in any manner, it is impelled by *overwhelming emotional turmoil*. Virtually everyone who dies by suicide does so while in extreme emotional turmoil, usually as a result of clinical depression.
2. Suicide is nearly always *an irrational act*, since it is a permanent end to a person's life to deal with what is nearly always temporary emotional pain.
3. We have no way of knowing whether most people who die by suicide feel compelled to do it, or whether instead they feel like it is their true, subjective desire. This probably varies somewhat from person to person, but I know many people who've felt as though suicide was being compelled.<sup>3</sup>

[http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at\\_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at\\_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=2&at\\_tot=4](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=2&at_tot=4)

## Why Suicide isn't the Choice You Think it Is

Depression is an insidious disorder, no matter what form it takes or where it comes from. One of the core components of depression is [cognitive distortions](#). That's psychobabble for what most people call "lies." Depression lies to you. It tells you things like, "You suck at everything you do" without any qualification or argument.

It says, "Life will never get any better than this, so you might as well end it."

But cognitive distortions aren't reality or a reflection of the truth. They are distortions in your brain caused by the depressive forces residing therein. We can't tell you *why* these things happen (yet), but we can tell you that when depression is successfully treated, these distortions go away. We start seeing ourselves and reality for what it is again.

So what kind of choice do you think a person is making when under the influence of these kinds of depression lies? Is it a choice born of free will? Or a choice tied up in emotional turmoil, irrationality, and a feeling of being compelled toward an inevitable fate?

## Walsh's False Dichotomy

According to Walsh, if you don't believe suicide is a choice, then you shouldn't intervene in someone's suicidal thoughts or actions (because if it's not a choice, your actions can't help). But it's a false dichotomy, a logical fallacy. You can believe suicide is not the usual kind of choice one makes in life, and still work to help those who are suicidal.

In what world do we define how we behave based upon whether or not something someone does is a "choice" or not? If an enemy soldier comes into our hospital wounded, wouldn't we treat his wounds? If your best friend is downsized, unemployed, and loses his apartment – all a result of no choices he made – wouldn't you still offer him a place to stay?

## Depression Isn't a Choice Either

Maybe some people consciously ignore the emotional and cognitive ravages of depression — which take away rationality and logic — because it makes them feel better about these kinds of tragedies.

[http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at\\_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at\\_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at\\_ab=per-2&at\\_pos=2&at\\_tot=4](http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2014/08/18/is-suicide-a-free-choice-or-a-false-choice/#at_pco=smlrebh-1.0&at_si=55f965ca00b1e474&at_ab=per-2&at_pos=2&at_tot=4)

Maybe they believe depression isn't a real disorder, or perhaps that it can be cured by simply welcoming more "joy" into one's life.

But for those of us who work in the field every day and read the science, we know otherwise. We know [depression is real](#). We know depression tells us lies about ourselves, and our lives. We know that suicide is only a choice if you take away the concept of free will, because few people who die by suicide feel like they had a choice.

Suicide is the result of un-treated or under-treated depression. Suicide comes about as the result of the feelings and thoughts associated with depression; it is not the free choice made in a vacuum that some people would have you believe. There is little rational decision-making done with suicide, and it's rarely done outside of some intense emotional turmoil.

People who die by suicide do so because they believe all other avenues in their life have been cut off. They often feel compelled toward suicide, because, simply, the pain of living has become greater than the resources they have to deal with it.

People who die by suicide aren't making a choice — they're losing a fight against intolerable pain, emotional turmoil, and loss of hope.<sup>4</sup>

Read the full response from Walsh: [Depression isn't a choice but suicide is: my detailed response to the critics](#)

**Footnotes:**

1. Sorry, you'll have to Google it, as I won't provide Walsh with any more traffic than he's already gotten for this statement. []
2. Pies, R. (2007). [Determinism and the Dimensions of Freedom: Part II. Implications for Psychiatry and Law](#). *Psychiatric Times*. []
3. In my own personal experience with suicidal thoughts when I was a young adult, I didn't feel like I had a choice — it seemed like it was the one and only solution. []
4. In light of these arguments, I will no longer reference suicide as a choice in any of my future writings about suicide. []

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