



# Loss of trust



In this lecture I am going to discuss the concept of trust in a little more detail by drawing on ideas from philosophy, theology, sociology and psychology. I will then go on to summarise the key findings from our study to show how losing trust is an important aspect of the suicidal process.

## What is trust?

Trust is complex and very difficult to define. It seems to be one of those things that we only really notice when we don't have it. When trust is lacking we may feel wary or suspicious of others, or feel that we are not fully trustworthy ourselves. When we trust, we are able to ignore the fact that we can't completely know other people's feelings, thoughts or motives, or the future – even our own feelings and motives are partially obscured from us. When trust is missing, uncertainty can feel overwhelming and the person can become anxious.

Trust reduces anxiety by allowing us to think, feel and behave as if things are certain and simple, when in reality they are uncertain and complex.

In other words, trust enables us to act, to do things, which we refer to as having *agency*. Without trust we have no agency - we stop being able to act - we stop being able to do things in our lives and to function normally.

## *Trust and the Future*

A sociologist, Piotr Sztompka (1999), suggests that trusting is like placing a bet on what is going to happen. When you trust, you place a bet that things will turn out well. You take a risk and make a commitment to a version of the future that is positive. For example, you might trust that when you reach your hand out towards another person, they will shake it. In many cases, trust is so implicit that you don't even realise you're doing it. But, distrust is like placing a bet that things will turn out badly.

In trusting, we are reaching out towards the future with optimism, and so trust is bound up with hope and hopefulness. In the same way, mistrust and distrust are connected with hopelessness and pessimism.

## *Trust and Relationships*

Trust is social and relational - it happens between people and is a part of human social relationships. Trust is how we open up to another person. Rowan Williams, (2007, p4), the theologian and now-retired Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote in his book *Tokens of Trust* that mistrust comes about when we feel

another's agenda is different from our own, and they are being untruthful about it. We might fear that they are trying to get us to open up and reveal ourselves, without being prepared to do the same. In this case trusting could be too risky. Trust takes you closer to others, whereas distrust takes you further away, and although both can be useful at the right time and place, lack of trust can become a problem for people who are vulnerable to feeling suicidal.

### **Trust and the Suicide Process**

In this second part of the lecture on trust, I will explore how trust seems to be an important aspect of the process of suicide.

Based on the findings of our study, I believe that part of the process leading towards a suicide or suicide attempt is a lack of trust, not just in situations that warrant caution, but throughout many aspects of life. This lack of trust may become evident through a number of different experiences, which centre on how the person feels about relationships, and how they manage anxieties.

#### *Trusting others*

Trusting others can be especially difficult for some people, and they may not feel comfortable sharing their feelings or responsibilities with anyone else. This can sometimes be due to past experiences in which they felt betrayed or let down. Other people may think of them as 'independent' because they take on extra responsibilities or seem to like being 'in charge' - in other words, they'd rather not rely on anyone else. Not trusting others may not be immediately problematic and some people rely on themselves for years. However, if that person's confidence is knocked and they begin to doubt their ability to cope, without anyone else to trust, suicidal thoughts, feelings and behaviour may escalate.

#### *Feeling (un)trustworthy*

One aspect connected to losing trust in others can be feeling that others have lost trust in you, and this can lead to feeling that you are untrustworthy. Sometimes a person may feel their family or friends don't trust them because of things they have done in the past, for example previous suicide attempts. The person may try very hard to gain the trust of others, but find they are met with suspicion by those around them who are scared about what is happening. This can become a vicious circle, as the person hides what is really happening in an attempt to gain the trust of others, and unintentionally becomes less trustworthy in the process. In some cases the vicious circle starts when the suicidal person is not trusted and loses trust in others as a consequence.

#### *Losing trust in yourself*

A further aspect of feeling untrustworthy is starting to doubt yourself. For some people this means losing confidence in their ability to be a good person and fulfil their role (as parent, friend, partner), for others it might be losing confidence in their performance (for example losing confidence in their ability

to do their job well or get good grades in their studies). For others, there may be a loss of trust in their own actions; they may feel they cannot fully trust themselves to keep themselves safe.

### *Anxiety and feeling unsafe*

Without trust, feelings of anxiety can become overwhelming. The world can seem like a very unsafe place and a person can feel frightened and anxious. They may feel they have no confidence, or feel overwhelmed with doubts and worries. At its worst, these feelings can become debilitating and leave people unable to undertake any meaningful activity. Anxieties become outright fears, and in some people phobias such as agoraphobia.

For some people, losing trust can extend to feeling quite paranoid about those around them, or society at large. Sometimes their worries can seem out of proportion with reality. They may believe they are being watched, talked about, or are about to be 'caught out' by the authorities. Financial worries sometimes seem to drive these fears, but they can also relate to their concerns about what friends and family 'really' think of them.

### ***Coping with a lack of trust***

Because of the difficulties with relationships and overwhelming anxieties and fears that a lack of trust can bring about, many people use alternative strategies to deal with the uncertainty and complexity of life. These strategies can be seen as 'trust substitutes', and can be very successful, but eventually, the strain of having to substitute trust with other strategies can become exhausting.

### *Hiding how you feel to protect yourself and others*

Some people struggle to trust others enough to show how they're really feeling. They become guarded and believe that sharing their feelings is too much of a risk to take. They may not trust that others will use that information well and feel that sharing their feelings will make them more vulnerable. Instead they may prefer to keep people at arm's length by putting on a 'front' or not revealing too much of themselves. For some people, they may not be able to trust that others would be able to cope with hearing about difficult feelings, or may be trying to protect them from having to do so.

### *Needing certainty, control and order*

Another way to cope with uncertainty is to try to create order. Things can seem more orderly and certain if you take control of them. For example, this could be by working very hard in order to try to guarantee the outcome of something. Or it could be by taking charge of a project. When things don't go to plan, it can seem catastrophic.

### *Seeking reassurance*

Sometimes no matter how hard you try to hide your vulnerabilities, or create order and certainty out of uncertainty, you are left with the feeling that what you are doing is not good enough. One aspect of losing trust is losing trust in yourself, losing confidence in your ability to be a good person or perform to

an acceptable standard. In order to keep going, and as a way to cope with the anxiety of feeling 'not good enough', sometimes people seek reassurance from the people around them. They ask, often repetitively, if they are performing well enough. This can be difficult and frustrating for people around them, who may think their worries are out of proportion.

### **The relationship between trust, worth and exhaustion**

In this final part of the lecture, we will briefly explore how trust links with other aspects of the suicidal process, and look at how it may be possible to recover the ability to trust, before summarising the main points from this lecture.

Trust and worth can be seen as two sides of the same coin. It seems that when trusting others, yourself or the world around you becomes more difficult, then having a secure sense of self-worth is also more challenging. For example, if you struggle to trust others enough to show them how you are really feeling – if you are used to putting on an act to hide what is really going on inside – then you might then start to believe that your friends and family don't really know the 'real' you. This in turn may impact on how you perceive your sense of worth and how acceptable you are to those around you. And together, a lack of worth and a lack of trust can contribute to exhaustion, for example if someone is unable to share their responsibilities with others, or if they are continually trying to mask their true feelings, this is effortful and a drain on their resources.

### ***Recovering the ability to trust***

How can people recover the ability to trust, and to feel trustworthy? First, there is the possibility that you can act as if you trust. You can make a conscious decision to put your trust in someone else. That is to take the risk and to trust in someone else. One participant to the study describes how after her suicide attempt was interrupted she decided she had to work with the staff on her ward. That is, she had to put some trust in them.

It is also the case that having someone take a risk and put their trust in you can help you gain a feeling of autonomy, and self-esteem. In turn, this could help you find the courage to trust someone else. I'll finish this lecture with a quote from a participant who describes how her daughter was trusted by a new clinic she was admitted to:

"Within a week she was taken off section. [...] And trusted. [...] And yeah the atmosphere there was just totally different. And after three months she'd made huge progress."

"...what had worked, was that they trusted her, they didn't watch her every move [...] They took her off section so that she could go shopping whenever she felt like it. She could do anything she wanted. And it transformed her."

### ***Summary***

Trust is essential in order to live a flourishing life. It enables you to act and allows you to interact with others. Without trust, the world can feel very unsafe and the person may be overwhelmed by anxieties, doubts and worries, or even paranoia or phobias.

In order to try to cope with the uncertainty and complexity of life, some people develop strategies to substitute for trust. They may hope to create order and certainty by attempting to control outcomes, or other's thoughts about them. So, they may work extremely hard to try to guarantee a certain outcome, and seem to fall apart when things don't go as perfectly as they hoped. Or they may hide certain feelings or behaviours, as they don't trust others to react appropriately to those feelings. In other words they may put on a 'front' that they think is going to be more acceptable to those around them. This front might give the impression that everything is ok, when on the inside this is far from the case. People may also lose confidence in what they are able to achieve, and in this case they may seek reassurances that they are still up to the job or able to perform their duties. This can be very confusing and frustrating for those around them.

A lack of trust has profound impacts on relationships; it creates distance between people who might otherwise be close, and it can be both stressful and distressing. As such, we believe that, along with a lack of worth, a lack of trust provides the background experience in the process of suicide. However, finding the courage to trust even when it is difficult, both for individuals within the suicidal process and their significant others, may help to start the process of reconnecting and reduce the isolation that is felt before a suicide or attempt.

## **References**

- Sztompka, P. (1999). *Trust. A Sociological Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
Williams, R., 2007. *Tokens of trust*. London: Canterbury Press Norwich.