

REMARKS BY PRESIDENT McALEESE
AT THE 3T'S CONFERENCE –

SUICIDE IN MODERN IRELAND: NEW DIMENSIONS, NEW RESPONSES
HOLIDAY INN, PEARSE STREET, DUBLIN 2

FRIDAY, 12TH NOVEMBER, 2004.

Dia dhibh a chairde. Go raibh maith agaibh as an gcuireadh agus as an bhfailte.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this important conference and for that warm welcome. I congratulate those whose insight into this most difficult subject identified the need for and the likely benefits of hosting such a conference. I hope that the next three days will prove to be rewarding and informative and help in that most important objective of 'Turning The Tide of Suicide' (3Ts Project). There is an impressive line up of contributors from both home and abroad and in particular I would like to welcome Professor John Mann from Columbia University and Professor Paul Soloff from the University of Pittsburgh to Ireland and Ms. Kim Strouse and to thank them and all the participants for sharing your experience and understanding of a subject that has become a dark cloud gathering over Ireland in recent years.

The people who have come here know the importance of exploring the causes and ways of dealing with suicide. A suicide is a tragic and shattering occurrence that not only brings a life to an untimely end but also has a devastating impact on family and friends. This conference provides a forum where the myriad issues associated with suicide can be explored, views shared, understanding improved. In Ireland we have come to know the extent of the problem of suicide in its harshest reality – it is heartbreaking and utterly appalling to have to acknowledge that it is the most common cause of death among 15 to 24 year olds in our country. We can take little solace from the knowledge that this trend is not confined to Ireland but is a growing global problem.

There is something within us that troubles us deeply when we hear of the death of a young person, whether through accident or illness. We experience a particular sense of loss for the potential that was never allowed to fully blossom, for all that might have been, and for the devastating and lasting impact on the parents and family and friends of that person. The words of TS Eliot seem apt:

*Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden*

That sense of loss is compounded inexorably in the case of a person who died by suicide. Family members and friends are often left confounded, never quite comprehending why, what drove their loved one to it, what was it in their lives that was so unbearable and even if answers are found, the finality of what has happened cannot be changed. In its wake comes a torrent of emotions and so many unanswered, unanswerable questions.

For these reasons it must remain an absolute imperative of society to do all that we can to reduce the incidence of suicide, to end the unconscionable suffering for everyone touched by it.

Preventing suicide means in part influencing, in a corrective and constructive way, the development of the person and we recognise that need more so in adolescence than perhaps any other phase of life. Adolescence is a time of profound change as the young make the transition to adulthood. It is not an easy transition and for many it is such a roller coaster of new relationships, greater freedom, longer-term expectations and increasing responsibility for the self, that the transition is frequently far from seamless. No sooner is the Playstation packed away it seems when romance, sexuality, alcohol, drugs, exams, careers, crowd in on a life just barely ready for the onslaught. If there is a weakness in their resilience and coping skills it will be tested and if we are lucky experience will make them more assured not less. But we cannot afford to leave it to luck. An important aspect of suicide prevention has been identified as the need to promote self-esteem and self-confidence and to ensure that our young people develop the personal and social skills to equip them for life, to make them copers, people who can face into problems and emerge safe. Life's problems repeat themselves from generation to generation and few things in the world are new but if you are fifteen the world's accumulated wisdom is not always visible or accessible especially if you suffer in silence. We need to break that silence, to develop in our young an ability to come forward and talk about emotions and fears to another person, to recognise when they are in danger of coping badly, to realize there is help and there is hope.

Since the launch of the 3T's project last year you have done much to help promote public awareness of suicide and suicidal behaviour. This conference will help bring this tragic problem out into the arena of discussion, drawing in all the players we need to help us build comprehensive analysis and find effective answers. No- one here has all the insight, all the answers but each has his or her own unique pieces of the jigsaw puzzle we urgently need to put together. Over the next three days you will have a chance to put your piece on the table and to learn as others put their pieces down too. Hopefully things which were only half a story or part of a picture will begin to sharpen, to take on new clarity. Hopefully ideas, insights and experiences will be traded and validated and from this shared focus will come a route map to take us to a future when the statistical graph for suicide drops down and our hearts lift. I thank each of you for your generosity in being here and making this issue your concern for what you do here is critically important to all of us.

I would like to thank everyone involved for all the hard work undertaken in organising this worthwhile conference and a special thank you to the Holiday Inn for its generous sponsorship.

Is iontach an obair ata ar siul agaibh anseo. Go n-eiri go geal libh. Go raibh maith agaibh.