

## Can Artificial Intelligence Learn About Suicide?

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### **Abstract**

This article presents tests of ChatGPT's knowledge about suicide. ChatGPT provided general information and, when presented with a more complex question, gave a simple answer. However, over time, ChatGPT improved its response to the complex question. Recently, artificial intelligence programs have appeared that can write essays on any topic. This has caused concern in academia as students use these programs to write assignments for their courses. In a recent trial, artificial intelligence programs have passed qualifying exams.

One such program is ChatGPT, produced by openai.com. To explore the potential of ChatGPT, I typed in it two questions on February 1, 2023. Here they are and the responses.

### **1.How can we prevent suicide?**

*Preventing suicide involves a multi-faceted approach that includes:*

- *Identifying and providing support for individuals at risk for suicide, such as those who have a history of suicidal thoughts or attempts, have a mental health condition, have recently experienced a significant loss, or have a family history of suicide.*
- *Making mental health services and resources, such as counseling and hotlines, easily accessible to those in need.*
- *Reducing access to lethal means, such as firearms and prescription drugs, for individuals at risk for suicide.*
- *Encouraging individuals to seek help if they are experiencing suicidal thoughts and educating them on the warning signs of suicide.*
- *Creating a supportive environment that promotes mental wellness and encourages individuals to talk openly about their mental health.*
- *Developing and implementing suicide prevention programs in schools, workplaces, and other community settings.*
- *Increasing public awareness and understanding about suicide and its causes, as well as breaking down the stigma surrounding mental health.*
- *Collaboration between communities, organizations and government to work together to prevent suicide.*

### **2.Why do people choose to die by suicide?**

*People choose to die by suicide for a variety of reasons. Some common factors that can contribute to suicide include:*

1. *Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder.*
2. *Chronic pain or terminal illness.*
3. *Substance abuse issues.*
4. *A history of trauma or abuse.*
5. *A recent loss or significant life change.*
6. *A family history of suicide.*
7. *A lack of access to or engagement with mental health services.*
8. *Social isolation and feelings of hopelessness and helplessness.*

9. *A perceived sense of burden or feeling like they are a burden to others.*

*It's important to note that suicide is complex and often the result of multiple factors, and not just one cause. And it's important to seek professional help if you are experiencing suicidal thoughts or know someone who is.*

These responses are excellent. Indeed, they sound a lot like part of the Introductions that scholars write for their articles!

**Steven Stack (personal communication) noted that:**

It seems like the computer reflects the dominant ideas, mostly psychological. Missing are structural factors like addressing structured class inequality. Prevention can also include strategies like increasing the minimum wage faster than inflation. Four studies now find that states that increased the minimum wage by small amounts (e.g., \$1.00) led to lower rates of suicide. The AI program did not mention factors like that, probably because they have minimal knowledge of the literature.

### **3.Can the suicide rate of a country ever be zero?**

Let us see how ChatGPT deals with more complex issues. Yang and Lester (2009) have argued that the suicide rate can never be zero, and they produced some empirical evidence that this is so. Did ChatGPT know of Yang and Lester's article?

*It is unlikely that the suicide rate of a country will ever reach zero. Suicide is a complex issue that is influenced by a variety of factors, including mental health, social support, access to resources, and societal attitudes towards mental health. While suicide prevention efforts can help to reduce the suicide rate, it is unlikely that it will ever be completely eliminated. Additionally, it's important to note that suicide is a leading cause of death globally and its prevention is a major public health priority. Clearly, ChatGPT is not always conversant with recent scholarly research.*

### **4. In the play Oedipus Rex, written by Sophocles, why did Jocasta die by suicide?**

Lester (2002) has provided a psychoanalytic analysis of the suicides in the plays written by Sophocles. In the play Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, it is clear that Jocasta realized very quickly that she has married her son. She is content to live with that as long as Oedipus stops questioning what happened in his life, namely that he murdered his father and married his mother as prophesized. Jocasta cannot face the shame which she would feel if the truth became public. When Oedipus refuses to stop searching for the truth, Jocasta chooses to die by suicide. At first, ChatGPT did not know of this interpretation.

*In the play "Oedipus Rex" written by Sophocles, Jocasta, the wife of Oedipus and mother of his children, kills herself out of shock and despair upon realizing that Oedipus is her son and that she had unknowingly married and had children with her own son. The revelation is so devastating to her that she chooses to end her life rather than continue living with the knowledge and shame of her actions.*

I wrote the results of this test and uploaded it in a document onto ResearchGate.net.

### **5. Can AI Learn?**

Several months later (December 21, 2023) I asked ChatGPT the same question about Jocasta's suicide.

*In Greek mythology, Jocasta is a character best known for her role in the tragic story of Oedipus. The details of Jocasta's death vary in different versions of the myth, and it's important to note that the story itself is a work of fiction.*

*The most well-known version of the story is found in Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex." In this version, Oedipus discovers that he has unwittingly fulfilled a prophecy that foretold he would kill his father and marry his mother. When Oedipus realizes the truth, he blinds himself, and Jocasta, horrified by the revelation and the tragic fate of her family, hangs herself.*

*The reasons for Jocasta's suicide are complex and involve a combination of shame, guilt, and horror at the fulfillment of the prophecy. The Oedipus myth explores themes of fate, free will, and the consequences of trying to avoid destiny, making it a powerful and enduring tragedy in Greek literature.*

This is impressive. Did ChatGPT read my uploaded document in ResearchGate? Shame and guilt are now moiré prominent as motivating forces for Jocasta's suicide.

On September 21, 2024, I asked ChatGPT the same question again. The response was much detailed,

In Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex", Jocasta dies by suicide because of the unbearable guilt and horror she feels upon realizing the truth of her life. Jocasta is both the wife and mother of Oedipus, though neither of them initially knows it.

Here's a breakdown of the key reasons behind her suicide:

**Realization of the Truth:** Jocasta slowly uncovers the truth that Oedipus, her husband, is also her son. Many years earlier, she and her husband Laius (Oedipus' biological father) had received a prophecy that their son would kill Laius and marry her. To avoid this fate, they abandoned Oedipus as a baby. However, the prophecy comes true despite their efforts to prevent it.

**Incest and Patricide:** The discovery that she unknowingly married her own son and that Oedipus had killed his father, Laius, leads Jocasta into deep despair. The shame of incest, the violation of social and moral norms, and the realization that the gods' prophecies were inescapable drive her to extreme grief.

**Inescapable Fate:** Jocasta, like Oedipus, had tried to defy the prophecy given by the oracle, believing that they could outmaneuver fate. Her suicide reflects her final recognition that fate is unchangeable and that her family is doomed by the will of the gods.

Overwhelmed by this horrifying truth, Jocasta chooses to end her life by hanging herself in her bedroom. Her death symbolizes her ultimate escape from the agony of facing her role in the tragic events that have unfolded.

ChatGPT is getting better. It still does not quite understand that, when Jocasta realizes that she has married her son, she does not necessarily feel horror and shame at that fact. Rather, it seems that she is content to continue as Oedipus's wife (and presumably lover). It is the public knowledge of this that horrifies her and motivates her suicide.

## 6. Comment

ChatGPT, apparently, can tap into commonly available knowledge about suicide, but is limited in its ability to move beyond common knowledge. ChatGPT appears to be limited in its use of scholarly research. On the other hand, even when new material is uploaded into an obscure website, ChatGPT is apparently able to find this and improve its responses to questions. When this article is published, perhaps the next time that I test ChatGPT, it will respond even more accurately.

## References

1. Lester, D. (2003). Sophocles. *Crisis*, 23, 34-37
2. Yang, B., & Lester, D. (2009). Is there a natural suicide rate? *Applied Economics Letters*, 16, 137-140.