

A “Metaphor Menu” for People Living with Suicidal Thoughts

Created by David O’Reilly, Jelena O’Reilly, and Susan Nacey.



UNIVERSITY
of York

iNN
University of
Inland Norway

RAAM
The Association for Researching and Applying Metaphor

Version: 22nd April 2026

Contents

[Purpose \(page 2\)](#)

[About \(page 3\)](#)

[Tips for understanding and using this resource \(page 4\)](#)

[Acknowledgements \(page 5\)](#)

[A “Metaphor Menu” for People Living with Suicidal Thoughts \(page 6\)](#)

[1. Conflict \(page 7\)](#)

[2. Darkness \(page 8\)](#)

[3. Fabric \(page 9\)](#)

[4. Hole \(page 10\)](#)

[5. Journey \(page 11\)](#)

[6. Machine \(page 12\)](#)

[7. Option \(page 13\)](#)

[8. Other \(page 14\)](#)

[9. Physical pain \(page 15\)](#)

[10. Weight \(page 16\)](#)

Purpose

A resource *with* metaphors for talking about suicide, based on language used by people we spoke to and heard from.

A resource *for* people who experience suicidal thoughts, people close to them, and practitioners.

A resource *to* broaden and deepen conversations about suicide.

The menu is free to download and use. In published works please cite as:

O'Reilly, D., O'Reilly, J., & Nacey, S. (2026). A “metaphor menu” for people living with suicidal thoughts. <https://metaphormenusuicide.com/>

About

Metaphor can be a powerful tool for helping others understand our experiences, emotions, and identity.

“Feeling suicidal happens daily, sometimes I battle it for hours.”

Think of metaphor as talking about one thing as if it was something else.

This project explored metaphors used by adults living with suicidal thoughts, their language preferences, and those of people close to them, and mental health practitioners.

Through interviews and questionnaires, we found wide and diverse use of metaphors to talk about experiences of daily and/or periodic suicidal thoughts, over the longer term and during more intense, acute periods; metaphors for suicide itself; for relationships with family, partners, friends, and practitioners; for support, and to describe identity.

We have created a short menu of 10 the main metaphors found, each with examples.

Tips for understanding and using the menu:

The menu presents 10 main metaphors found in our data, each with examples produced by our participants.

What counts as a metaphor? Some words and phrases seem quite literal or conventional; others seem more metaphorical or creative. While researchers enjoy discussing the technicalities of this question(!), think of a metaphor as *talking about one thing as if it was something else*.

One size does not fit all! Different metaphors suit particular people, ideas, conversations, and moments. This is the beauty of a menu...if it helps, choose it...if it doesn't, lose it!

Metaphors ≠ better than literal language! It really depends.

Mixing metaphors is common! The examples provide you with a taste of some of the rapid mixing of metaphors and metaphor-to-literal shifts heard in our discussions, as interviewees developed and shaped their ideas.

Tuning is common! Notice how participants adjusted the force of their ideas using *like*, *as if*, and *almost as if*.

Use the website to let us know other metaphors that you find helpful!

Resource developed with and for adults (over 18s). This is NOT a resource for people in crisis.

Acknowledgements

MOST OF ALL: A huge thank you to **all interviewees and questionnaire respondents**, without whom this research and resource would not have been possible.

FUNDING: Research that led to A “*Metaphor Menu*” for People Living with Suicidal Thoughts was funded by the **Association for Researching and Applying Metaphor (RaAM)** Research Grant (UK charity number: 1119686) and by the University of York, Department of Education.

TRAINING: We are grateful to **the Samaritans** for providing the research team with training on Managing Suicidal Conversations.

RESOURCE PRODUCTION: A huge thank you to **Hijinks Studies** for producing the explainer video and menu images.

VIDEO NARRATION: Another huge thank you, to **Sarah Wild**, for lending her voice to the explainer video.

RESOURCE INSPIRATION: The “Metaphor Menu” resource framework was inspired by A ‘**Metaphor Menu**’ for people living with cancer, produced as part of the **‘Metaphor, Cancer and the End of Life’ project** at Lancaster University.

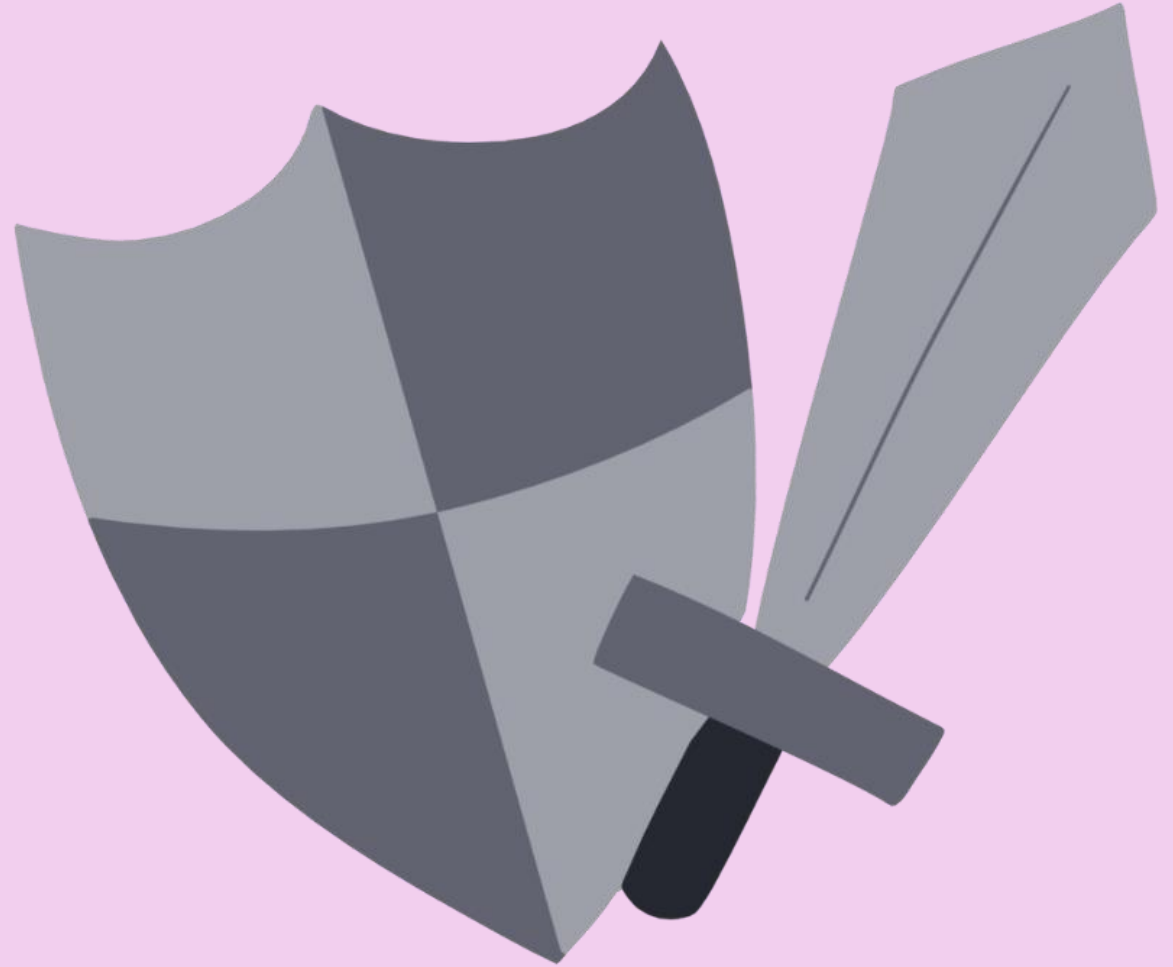
A “Metaphor Menu” for People Living with Suicidal Thoughts

Feeling suicidal happens daily, sometimes **I battle it for hours.**

When I feel suicidal **there's no fight in me. I don't fight.** It just kind of takes control. And when I think about reasons not to kill myself, I **wouldn't say it was like having a fight. It's more guilt than fight.**

Usually, I manage to get on top of **things** because I know enough about how the brain works that I can implement changes.

1. Conflict



I've had dark periods of time, but I've managed to get through them.

Suicidal thoughts are like a cloud hanging over me all the time, and even when life tries to bring sunshine, it just can't get through that cloud. But the clouds eventually move bit by bit and light can get through.

As I live with not wanting to live, I sometimes feel like I exist in the shadows, or that I'm a kind of shadow version of myself.

2. Darkness



3. Fabric



Feeling suicidal has **torn me apart** and continues to **tear me apart at the very core of my being** and who I am. It feels **like I can't be stuck back together**. To carry on existing when **I'm torn in two** is so painful.

I try not to let suicidal thoughts **ingrain themselves** into how I'm feeling at the time.

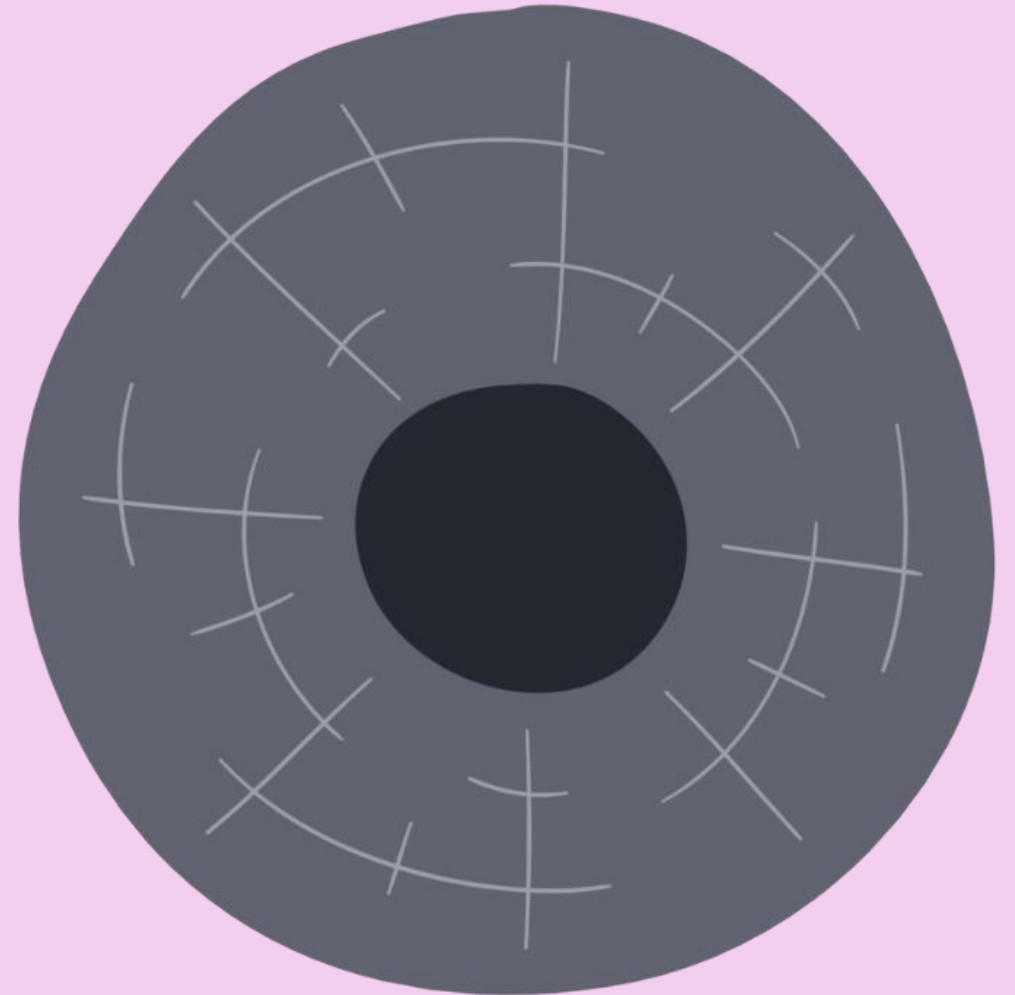
Living with suicidal thoughts, it's **as if you'd knitted a jumper** but actually **the thread has come loose**, it still has the **shape of a jumper**, but it would just **take one pull and the whole thing would fall apart**. I **look like I'm knitted together**, but in fact, I'm not at all.

Feeling suicidal is **like being in a very deep well, a pit that's grey and dark, and you can't get out of it, and you can't do anything, you can't think about anything else.**

Now **I don't go down that rabbit hole too much, because that's what suicidal thoughts can be like, rabbit hole-esque, seductive.**

My depression is **like being trapped in the middle of a long unlit tunnel** without knowing which end was closest, I'm treading water, I don't know how long until it's completely flooded. Which direction do I swim? How long can I hold my breath?

4. Hole



Feeling suicidal, it's like everything around is so busy but you're walking through chaos, everything's kind of washing over you, everything's really busy, everything's chaotic, but there's almost a sense of still.

I think it's really important to talk about suicidal thoughts in a way that doesn't put pressure on people, that acknowledges and celebrates the really tiny small steps.

By even referring to the experience of suicidal thoughts as a journey, it implies there's a route and it implies there's an end to that route as well, that could be a positive end.

5. Journey



6. Machine

When I'm suicidal, I definitely feel this **big sense of just wanting to just stop, to turn myself off.**

When I experience suicidal thoughts it's **almost like I've got a tab that's always open, rather than thoughts popping into my head.**

When the suicidal thoughts are intense, **all I want is a chance to be free of the noise in my head, to be free of 'me'. I'm so overwhelmed I just want everything to stop.**



7. Option

EXIT



When things get overwhelming for me, it's **almost like there's always this option** of 'well if things get too bad, I've just always got that as **an out** if I need to'.

Feeling that way, taking my own life, became **the only option in my head, the only option** really in terms of a way forward.

When I decided on suicide, it's almost like everything lifted, it was a huge sense of relief. I just felt like there was **a way out now.**

8. Other



I feel done with attending to basic needs like eating and sleeping, all I ever want to do is sleep, I feel **like a creature that I have to keep alive.**

The suicidal thoughts are **very intrusive and unwanted.** It's just like **something else there intrudes on me, and I don't want it there.** Most of the time I don't want to end my life, but when I do it's that I just can't cope with this or the situation.

When I experience suicidal thoughts, I can feel a bit **like a ghost,** like I feel **everyone exists around me, but I'm not part of the world,** a kind of depersonalisation.

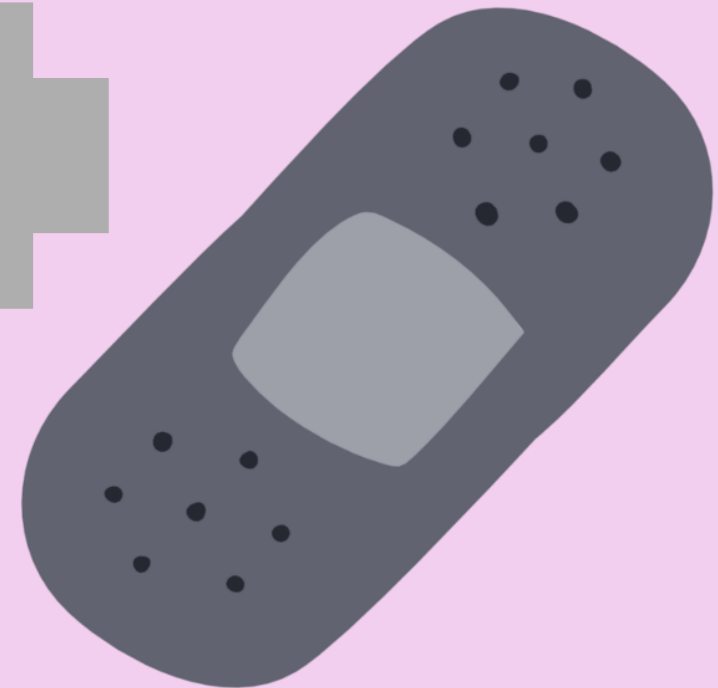
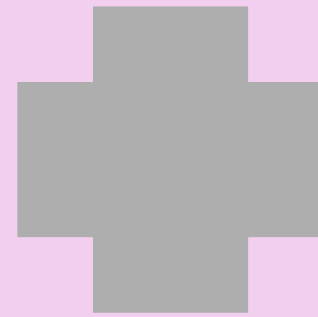
I describe the experience of living with suicidal thoughts as **being in so much pain, like a terminal pain**, and I need to end the pain.

Feeling suicidal **brings immense pain, it's unbearable**, it feels like death would be a relief, but I also feel scared of the possible physical pain of suicide and how long it would take.

When I've felt suicidal in the past it's **like I've transcended the pain that led me down this path in the first place**.

There's a kind of **numbing effect**. It's like they say that if you burn to death then fairly early on in the process all of your pain receptors are burnt away so you no longer feel it.

9. Physical pain



10. Weight

When I experience suicidal thoughts, I feel **quite heavy**, I feel **quite weighted down**.

I describe it as feeling like **a burden**.
When I was younger, I didn't want to be **a burden** on other people.

When I decided on suicide, I felt **very light** and I felt **a lot of ease from it, from making the decision**. Luckily, I now have medication and support.

