

The influence of the internet on suicidal behavior

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A recent study by the University of Otago, Wellington into internet pro-suicide and support sites indicates that significant improvements need to be made in this area to help prevent suicidal behavior.

The study led by Professor Sunny Collings from the Social Psychiatry and [Population](#) Mental Health Unit investigated the quality and content of websites related to suicide both in New Zealand and internationally.

“At this stage the impact of the internet in relation to suicide isn’t well understood,” says Professor Collings, “so this research increases our understanding of this area, and points the way to improvements in support sites to assist in the prevention of suicidal behavior.”

The study investigated websites using Google, Yahoo and MSN and added NZ search engines AltaVista, GoogleNZ and SearchNZ. A total of 2160 search results from 718 distinct sites were analysed in terms of their content and placement.

Among the 2160 hits, 72 distinct sites appeared as the top result in at least one search. The most common were pro-suicide or suicide permissive sites (33%), while support sites for those wanting information were the second most common at 18%.

Four pro-suicide sites featured amongst the ten most retrieved Google results, but only one support site featuring in Google’s top 10. None of the top 10 sites from Google were NZ based.

“One of the big problems with the internet is that pro-suicide sites are often the first thing people see when they search about methods,” says Professor Collings. “In contrast support sites were only 9.3% of total hits, but never featured as the number one search result.”

The study shows many support sites lack links to other support websites. Overall the quality of sponsored supports sites appeared poor, frequently associated with commercial advertising says Professor Collings. She is also concerned they found no support sites aimed at people older than working age, who also have relatively high suicide rates.

The study suggests more effort should be made to make support sites more accessible through search engine optimization. Professor Collings says it is totally unsatisfactory to have pro-suicide sites occupying the first 10 search results, rather than information and advice to help prevent suicidal behavior in New Zealand.

“The use of moderated interactive internet forums could also be explored as these allow users to share coping strategies and skills to deal with their emotions in a crisis situation.”

The study says that support sites not only need to be more prominent through internet searches, but they need to clearly link to other sites aimed at older age groups. Essentially one site will not ‘fit all’ in terms of preventing [suicidal behavior](#), and people need to be guided to the site that best suits their age group and needs.

“Investment in well-designed, interactive, targeted, and optimized support sites would help mitigate the high visibility and negative effects of pro-suicide sites,” says Professor Collings. “In that regard internet support sites have an important role to play as one component in the front line of [suicide](#) prevention.”

Finally the researchers say the dynamic balance between pro-suicide and support sites also need to be monitored to maintain the profile of positive support sites over time.

Provided by University of Otago

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