

Study: Facing suicide attempts as a teenager could predict heart disease later in life

June 7 2016

Teenagers, particularly boys, who try to kill themselves or are close with someone who attempted suicide could face a higher rate of risk factors for heart disease in their twenties, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

Young adult men had higher blood pressure and systemic low-grade inflammation if they had attempted suicide as a teenager, while young adult women were more likely to be overweight/obese and have high blood pressure if they were close with someone who tried to kill him- or herself, according to a sample of approximately 8,000 people from a national study. The findings were consistent even when researchers controlled for education, social and economic adversity and behavioral issues.

"Physical health is rarely looked at in follow-up studies of suicide attempts," said the study's lead author, Lilly Shanahan, PhD, an assistant professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. "What we're seeing is that suicide attempts in adolescence—which are typically considered a mental health problem—could also signal the potential for physical health problems into young adulthood."

Close to 10 percent of young people in the sample reported attempting suicide at least once, and more than 40 percent reported being aware of a family member's or friend's suicide attempt. The sample came from the Add Health survey, a nationally representative sample of U.S.

adolescents who were first interviewed in grades 7-12 starting in 1994. Suicide attempts were measured four times over the next 13 years, when the participants reached their mid- to late twenties and early thirties. Researchers collected information to determine participants' socioeconomic status, health behaviors, overall health, depression, early adversity and impulsivity. Blood pressure, height and weight were measured during the fourth wave of the study, as was low-grade systemic inflammation, which was measured via blood samples.

"Suicide attempts in teenage boys are less common than in teenage girls, but they may signal a more serious risk for later physical health problems," Shanahan said. "In addition, previous research has shown many people face increased stigma, social isolation, unhealthy behaviors and fewer educational and job accomplishments." All of these factors, in addition to the actual suicide attempt itself, could contribute to future physical health risks, she added.

Although women's own suicide attempts were not associated with increased heart disease risk, women who had known someone else who had attempted suicide were more likely to be obese and have increased blood pressure later in young adulthood. While these differences were small in comparison to men, the results are consistent with previous research that shows women tend to be more affected than men by severe, negative events within their social networks.

Physiological risk markers were only measured once, at the end of the study. Therefore, the authors could not conclude that there is a causal link between suicide attempts and heart disease risk. They suggest further research into these findings. "It's important to view suicide attempts as a marker for potential future health risks and not a cause, and to keep in mind that those affected by their own or others' suicide attempts may benefit from a dual focus on mental and physical health in care," said Shanahan.

More information: "Developmental Timing of Suicide Attempts and Cardiovascular Risk During Young Adulthood," Lilly Shanahan, PhD, Kristen M. Schorpp, MA, Vanessa V. Volpe, PhD, Kathryn Linthicum, BA, and Jason A. Freeman, PhD, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; *Health Psychology*, published online June 6, 2016.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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