

Online offerings can facilitate psychological improvement in suicidal people

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Online offerings can facilitate psychological improvement in suicidal people.
Credit: Fotolia

Numerous offerings are available on the Internet for suicidal people desperately seeking advice. These can be divided into professional offerings run by crisis centres and those operated by non-professionals. Even the latter can help to improve the subjective situation, so long as they are so-called "anti-suicide forums."

The effect of media reports upon suicidal people has been investigated

many times. We know about the "Werther effect", that is to say imitative behaviour based on sensational reports of suicides in the media, which serve as a role model. Or even the opposite "Papageno effect", whereby reports about how [suicidal thoughts](#) have been dealt with constructively have a preventive effect upon potentially suicidal people. All of this data was collated for traditional print and AV media. Now, for the first time, a team of scientists from the Center for Public Health at the Medical University of Vienna has conducted a study looking at the question of communication behaviour on the Internet.

Says study author Thomas Niederkrotenthaler: "The online offering is very accessible. It falls into two main groups – the professional forums and the non-professional ones, operated by lay people." The study looks at the latter group, which in turn can be sub-divided according to two main parameters: "Anti-suicide forums" are clearly focussed upon suicide prevention and facilitate constructive exchange about crisis situations. "Pro-suicide forums", on the other hand, are aimed at the more specific requirements of a closed group of people and quite often involve a superficial exchange about [suicidal tendencies](#), which can be harmful to vulnerable people.

It is no surprise that long-term help is available on professional forums. The fundamental question of the study was whether non-professional forums had any beneficial effect in terms of deflecting people from their suicidal intent. Niederkrotenthaler's team looked at seven German-speaking forums and analysed 1,200 threads with around 25,000 postings. That is to say, in each case they examined one communication thread of a first poster about his/her issues.

The study concluded that beneficial effects were found particularly for anti-suicide forums, which indicate that the psychological state of the poster improved over the period of his/her posting activities. Niederkrotenthaler: "It is important to stress that, in the successful

examples, psychological improvement is associated with a dialogue setting, in which each poster discusses his/her own experiences in intimate terms and is actively listened to. At the same time, however, it is important to remember that professional help should also be sought, if necessary. Conversely, it is a good idea for professional helpers to talk to their patients and clients about posting on non-professional forums. This will prevent any potentially negative effects and also provide a better insight into the sufferer's situation."

Niederkrotenthaler advises that non-professional forums should in no way be demonised, because they represent an important target group for preventive work. What is important, he says, is that these offerings can provide sufferers with extra help and that experiences can also be discussed in professional settings.

More information: T. Niederkrotenthaler et al. Predictors of psychological improvement on non-professional suicide message boards: content analysis, *Psychological Medicine* (2016). [DOI: 10.1017/S003329171600221X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329171600221X)

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