

How people with suicidal thoughts can help each other through tough times

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Discussing suicidal thoughts is a difficult task, often hindered by the reluctance to burden family or friends with worries. At the same time, people may not always receive the necessary support from existing social

and mental health care structures.

According to WHO (2023), approximately 700,000 people die due to suicide every year. Even as the fourth leading cause of death among 15–29-year-olds, there are many more people who attempt to take their own life.

For many years, the media have focused on how the internet provides [young people](#) with information about suicide. However, a recent study from the University of Copenhagen in Denmark reveals that people with [suicidal thoughts](#) find [support](#) in closed peer groups on Danish social media.

The research is [published](#) in the journal *Mental Health & Prevention*.

"Overall, we found that these people want help. But we also found that getting the right help from the social and mental health care system can be difficult, and they therefore help each other navigate the system. For instance, someone might ask the group: 'What do I have to say to my GP if I want to be hospitalized?'" says Assistant Professor Jane Brandt Sørensen from the Department of Public Health at the University of Copenhagen, who is first author of the study.

"People with suicidal thoughts often lack the energy to contact or navigate the social and mental health system for support. Social media platforms serve as helpful alternatives. While other researchers have studied open groups, this study is unique in gaining access to a closed group, providing an online safe space where like-minded people support each other during difficult times," explains Sørensen.

A lot to learn from online groups

Over a six-month period, the researchers read posts and comments

within the group and conducted interviews with both moderators and members.

"The group moderators have [personal experience](#) with suicidal thoughts. We found that the group acts like a family, where people take care of each other. For instance, the moderators, if worried about a member of the group, follow up on members by writing private messages or even calling the police. It is an important task, but also a huge responsibility to take on for someone who is vulnerable too," says Jane Brandt Sørensen.

In general, the researchers found that members of the group would respond to long posts with detailed descriptions of the given member's life, while short posts saying that he or she was having a hard time, without much further context, received fewer comments.

"The study tells us that the health care system may have shortcomings in providing assistance to people experiencing suicidal thoughts. There is much to learn from these closed groups, which people seek out because they provide members an opportunity to talk with others who truly understand their struggle and can offer support during tough times.

"These groups consist of like-minded people who regard the community as a safe space for sharing thoughts and feelings. Understanding these interactions is crucial for delivering optimal support, both to people with suicidal thoughts and to administrators in these online social media groups," says Sørensen.

More information: Jane Brandt Sørensen et al, Online with suicidal ideation: How individuals communicate in and perceive a peer-to-peer mediated social media group, *Mental Health & Prevention* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.mhp.2023.200303](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhp.2023.200303)

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