

Suicidal thoughts among college students more common than expected

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More than half of 26,000 students across 70 colleges and universities who completed a survey on suicidal experiences reported having at least one episode of suicidal thinking at some point in their lives. Furthermore, 15 percent of students surveyed reported having seriously considered attempting suicide and more than 5 percent reported making a suicide attempt at least once in their lifetime.

Presenting Sunday at the 116th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, psychologist David J. Drum, PhD, and co-authors at the University of Texas at Austin reported their findings from a Web-based survey conducted by the National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education. The survey was administered in the spring of 2006 and gathered information about a range of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among college students. The survey was reviewed by the participating campus counseling directors as well as two experts in suicidology.

Six percent of undergraduates and 4 percent of graduate students reported seriously considering suicide within the 12 months prior to answering the survey. Therefore, the researchers posit, at an average college with 18,000 undergraduate students, some 1,080 undergraduates will seriously contemplate taking their lives at least once within a single year. Approximately two-thirds of those who contemplate suicide will do so more than once in a 12-month period.

The majority of students described their typical episode of suicidal thinking as intense and brief, with more than half the episodes lasting one day or less. The researchers found that, for a variety of reasons, more than half of students who experienced a recent suicidal crisis did not seek professional help or tell anyone about their suicidal thoughts.

The researchers used separate samples of undergraduate and graduate students. College sizes ranged from 820 to 58,156 students, with 17,752 being the average. For the 15,010 undergraduates, 62 percent were female and 38 percent were male. Seventy-nine percent were white and 21 percent were minorities. Ninety-five percent identified themselves as heterosexual and 5 percent identified as bisexual, gay or undecided. The average age was 22. For the 11,441 graduates, 60 percent were female and 40 percent were male. Seventy-two percent were white and 28 percent were minorities. Ninety-four percent identified themselves as heterosexual and 6 percent identified as bisexual, gay or undecided. The average age was 30.

Both undergraduate and graduate students gave these reasons for their suicidal thinking, in the following order: (1) wanting relief from emotional or physical pain; (2) problems with romantic relationships; (3) the desire to end their life; and (4) problems with school or academics. Fourteen percent of undergraduates and 8 percent of graduate students who seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous 12 months made a suicide attempt. Nineteen percent of undergraduate attempters and 28 percent of graduate student attempters required medical attention. Half of attempters reported overdosing on drugs as their method, said the authors.

From the survey, the authors found that suicidal thoughts are a frequently recurring experience akin to substance abuse, depression and eating disorders. They also found that relying solely upon the current treatment model, which identifies and helps students who are in crisis, is insufficient for addressing reducing all forms of suicide behavior on college campuses.

The authors suggest a new model for dealing with the problem of student suicidal tendencies in order to address the entire continuum of suicidal thoughts

and behaviors. By focusing on suicidal thoughts and behaviors as the problem, rather than looking only at students in crisis, interventions can be delivered at multiple points, they said. Furthermore, information from the survey can help match students who are at risk or who have already experienced suicidal thoughts and behaviors with the appropriate treatment. This will reduce the numbers of students entering the suicide continuum in the first place as well as reduce the progression from thoughts to attempts, they said.

With growing levels of distress among college students and diminishing resources to handle the consequences, suicide prevention needs to involve a cross section of campus personnel – administrators, student leaders, advisers, faculty, parents, counselors – and not just involve the suicidal student and the few mental health professionals available. "This would reduce the percentage of students who engage in suicidal thinking, who contemplate how to make an attempt and who continue to make attempts" said Drum.

Source: American Psychological Association

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