



What are the characteristics of arguments that precede youth suicide?

Researchers at Kent State University, USA have studied the characteristics of conflicts or arguments before death by suicide in young people aged 17 years or younger. Erin Orlins and colleagues harnessed data collated by the USA National Violent Death Reporting System that provides extensive narrative details about each case of suicide. Focusing on the year 2017, they identified 197 deaths by suicide that were associated with an interpersonal conflict in youths aged 9-17 years and analysed the narratives of each case to identify any trends.

“Overall, we found that most deaths by suicide occurred within 24 hours following an argument (79 %), and most arguments (70 %) occurred with a family member”, explains researcher Sheryl Chatfield. “Interestingly, we found that technology was either the primary or secondary reason for the argument in almost 25% of cases. We did not find a large proportion of cases that included reports of cyber bullying but instead found descriptions of arguments preceding or associated with restriction in access to technology”.



Dr Jessica Edwards

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Chatfield explained that there is disagreement among researchers regarding the role of technology and the internet in the lives of young people: “Although online resources are often viewed as efficient, cost effective, and beneficial, some researchers have expressed concern about the proportion of screen time accrued on a daily basis by youth and adolescents”, she says. “Clearly during the current pandemic, the emphasis of online health-promoting resources and screen time are both increasing”.

Based on their findings, the researchers suggest that clinical practitioners be aware of the potential for extreme responses among some adolescents following technology restrictions. “We suggest there is a need to better understand how young people perceive and interact with technology and the internet — it may not just be a matter of tracking or limiting screen time, but rather gaining better understanding of how virtual social interactions and supports are perceived and relied upon”, suggests Chatfield. “This concept is going to be particularly important when we can safely return to more in-person interactions after relying so heavily on virtual exchanges since early 2020 due to the pandemic. We additionally suggest, based on the range of circumstances and number of times friends and family members described a death by suicide as unexpected, that those who provide suicide risk recognition programming target families of any adolescent — not just those who appear clearly at risk”.

The researchers only analysed data from 2017, which comprised cases from 37 out of 50 US states. They are now expanding their research to assess cases from 2018 and 2019, representing all 50 US states so that they can explore the role of technology through time. “We are also interested in learning other ways technology use or restriction is described proximate to death by suicide”, says Chatfield. “These include use of the internet as a resource for information about suicide, and various ways social media is used preceding death by suicide”.

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Sheryl Chatfield

Referring to:

Orlins, E. et al. (2020), Characteristics of interpersonal conflicts preceding youth suicide: analysis of data from the 2017 National Violent Death Reporting System. Child Adolesc. Ment. Health. doi: 10.1111/camh.12439.



ACAMH Topic Guide: Self-harm and suicide, R Sedgwick et al



ACAMH Podcast: Suicide and self-harm, D Cottrell



JCPP Annual Research Review: Adolescent mental health in the digital age: facts, fears, and future directions, CL Odgers and MR Jensen

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