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What Drives People to Take Their Own Lives?

Suicide; a Plague, Statement, or Something More?

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Introduction

Suicide is an undeniably sensitive and complex topic that challenges our collective comprehension. Despite its prevalence, it remains shrouded in mystery. As we confront the harsh reality of individuals ending their own lives, it becomes increasingly more important to explore the intricate array of factors that contribute to this phenomenon. This project aims to shed light on the complex nature of suicide by conducting a thorough reading of existing research and statistics. By delving into the depths of this subject, the aim of this project is to provide readers with a nuanced understanding of suicide, highlighting its lack of straightforward explanations while addressing the fundamental question: “What drives people to take their own lives?”

Background and Theory

What is suicide and suicidal ideation?

“Suicide is the act of deliberately killing oneself.” (World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.). Suicide is a complex phenomenon which is influenced by a variety of factors, including mental health conditions, social, cultural, and environmental factors, as well as a mix of individual experiences and circumstances.

“Suicidal ideations, often called suicidal thoughts or ideas, is a broad term used to describe a range of contemplation, wishes, and preoccupations with death and suicide.” (Harmer et al., 2024) These thoughts can vary in both intensity and frequency. It is important to note that these thoughts range from considerations to detailed plans for suicide. It is also important to note that individuals who experience suicidal thoughts do not necessarily need to act on these thoughts. However, if the symptoms of suicidal ideations are worsening or growing more persistent, it is important to take them seriously and address them promptly. Suicidal ideation is often treatable with proper help, whether it be from loved ones’ acknowledgement or mental health professionals’ help.

Suicidal behavior can manifest itself in many ways. It is a wide spectrum, ranging from suicidal thoughts and ideation to actual suicide attempts and completed suicides. It is important to understand and acknowledge that suicide is often a result of a wide variety of factors, rather than one reason. These factors involve things such as, but not limited to; mental health disorders, experiences of trauma, loss, abuse, negative social circumstances, etc.

Past research and theory

People's perspective on suicide and suicidal ideation has been progressively evolving throughout history, sometimes for the worse and sometimes for the better. For example, in ancient Greece, suicide was considered a disgraceful act (Retterstøl, 1998). In the Middle Ages, suicide was seen as a sin and a violation of God's will. It was only in the 19th century that we began reaching significant advancements in the understanding and treatment of mental illness. This shifted us toward a more scientific and compassionate approach to suicide, which paved the way for a steady development of suicide prevention strategies, mental health professionals and hotlines aimed at providing support and acknowledgement to individuals in distress.

In our current society, attitudes toward suicide and suicidal ideation continue to evolve, albeit with some lingering stigma and misconceptions. There is a greater awareness of the influx of biological, psychological, and social factors which contribute to increased suicide risk. There are still many out there who lack a comprehensive understanding of why people commit suicide. This lack of understanding leads to a predetermined prejudice towards suicide and those who attempt to commit suicide and fail. To clear up this prejudice it is important to attempt to expand the general population's awareness towards the impact of suicide, and its reasoning.

Method

Research

This project gets all its information from existing research already done on this subject. I deemed it unethical and unrealistic for someone like me, with no pre-existing psychological degree, or

deep understanding of the subject to be able to perform an adequate self-study of this subject. At first, I performed a survey to gather information about particular subjects regarding suicide, such as how many people knew someone who had committed suicide. But basing my facts and information off the survey seemed inconsistent and frankly insensitive to the actual topic of suicide.

It is because of these factors that I relied on existing research as a guide. This research includes studies from experts, government approved medical websites and academic sources that helped me understand the different reasons behind suicide and suicidal ideation. By looking at the various underlying factors such as mental health problems, interpersonal dynamics, and life circumstances. I aimed to discern the array of factors which influenced individuals' decision to take their own life. I used credible publications and empirical studies to build a comprehensive understanding of suicide. This process involved carefully analyzing various perspectives and factors that increase risk of suicide and suicidal ideation. My aim was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the subject that goes beyond surface-level explanations. Whilst simultaneously giving individuals the understanding of suicide being a very complicated subject with a wide variety of factors.

Psychological Factors

Mental health disorders

When pondering the question of why individuals commit suicide, a critical factor that emerges is the role of mental health disorders. These disorders encompass a wide spectrum of disorders ranging from something like depression to schizophrenia. These disorders have a major influence on the individual's perception of reality, their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The most prevalent mental health disorders associated with suicide risk are depression, psychosis inducing disorders, bipolar disorder, and substance abuse disorders. (Better Health Channel [BHC], n.d.) (The Ohio State University Suicide Prevention Program [SPP], 2022.)

Depression is often characterized by persistent feelings of sadness, loneliness, hopelessness, exhaustion, and despair. It is globally acknowledged as the largest risk factor for suicide. Individuals struggling with depression or depressive thoughts often experience overwhelming emotional anguish. If this emotional torture is endured over long periods of time, it could eventually lead to suicidal ideation. This risk is particularly pronounced during depressive episodes. If depression co-occurs with other factors, such as substance abuse, the risk of suicidal ideation increases. Treatment for depression such as psychotherapy, medication and support from mental health professionals is crucial in decreasing the risk of suicide.

Similarly, bipolar disorder is characterized by alternating periods of depression and mania (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], n.d.). Bipolar disorder presents a higher risk of suicide during depressive and manic episodes. The constant shift in personality, emotion and perception could cause individuals with bipolar disorder to experience similar feelings of hopelessness and despair. Often, the depressive episodes one might experience with bipolar disorder are much harder to deal with than other disorders, due to the intensity of their feelings. These feelings, mixed with the volatile nature of the episodes could lead to the individuals engaging in impulsive or reckless behavior. This, however, is more common in individuals with type 1 bipolar, whereas type 2 bipolar does not have manic episodes but rather long and difficult depressive episodes. Managing bipolar disorder through mood stabilizers, psychotherapy and lifestyles adjustments is crucial in reducing suicide risk.

While there are disorders that disrupt your mood, there are also disorders that change your perception of reality, such as schizophrenia. It is recognized as a mental illness characterized by disruptions in thought processes, perceptions, emotional responsiveness, and social interactions with symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions and thought disorder (NIMH, n.d.). According to a study by James N. Samsom and Albert H. C. Wong “Patients with schizophrenia are at an increased risk for the development of depression. And depression has been reported during all stages of the course of schizophrenia.” (NLM, 2015). An important symptom of schizophrenia, which is also seen in people with bipolar disorder, is psychosis. Psychosis causes one to

hallucinate and experience delusions, thus increasing their chances of engaging in risky behavior. However, schizophrenia may disrupt the quality of life in some people, but it is not the main factor when it comes to completed suicide. Often, people with schizophrenia are also diagnosed with depression, which is the cause for the majority of suicide cases in schizophrenic people. When it comes to the suicide risk encompassing schizophrenia, close monitoring, medication, supportive therapy, and psychosocial interventions are essential in mitigating the risk.

Furthermore, substance abuse disorders, including alcoholism and drug addiction, significantly elevate the risk of suicide. According to a study regarding the interplay between addiction and increased suicide risk which was published by the National Library of Medicine “Over a third of suicide decedents test positive for alcohol; 63.5% of whom have blood concentrations demonstrating intoxication.” (NLM, 2021). Substance abuse can worsen mental health conditions, whilst simultaneously contributing to the development of mental health disorders. A large percentage of substance abuse issues are genetically predisposed. Approximately 40-60% of people who have dealt with substance abuse problems in their life have had a family member who had issues with alcohol or drugs. While it’s not a death sentence to have a family member with substance abuse issues, it makes it harder to stay away from the substances when taking them. Integrated treatment approaches both substance abuse and mental health issues, whilst simultaneously giving access to supportive services such as counseling and support groups. These factors are critical in addressing the intricate web of factors that substance abuse is composed of.

To conclude, mental health disorders play a central role in increasing suicide risk due to their profound impact on the individual’s perception of reality, behavior and well-being. An unattended mental illness can lead to catastrophic results in the individual’s mental health, leading to potential suicide ideation. Attempting to understand these mental health disorders and attempting to treat them early on is essential in preventing suicide and suicide ideation.

Social and Environmental Factors

Environmental factors

The influence social and environmental factors such as social isolation, interpersonal conflicts, bullying, abuse, and trauma have on suicidal behavior is profound. Social isolation, characterized by a lack of social interaction and connections or a sense of feeling alone, can lead to individuals never developing the proper coping mechanisms necessary to navigate challenges that may occur throughout life.

Interpersonal conflicts, whether within romantic, or social relationships, can be an active contributor to suicidal ideation and behavior. Conflict with loved ones, such as familial dispute, divorce, or a breakup, can intensify feelings of rejection and worthlessness. This can in turn undermine individuals' sense of worth. A consistent stream of conflicts may further isolate individuals, further strengthening the feeling of being alone, which can enhance their vulnerability to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. This development occurs due to the individual being left alone with their thoughts. Once negative thoughts, or rather suicidal ideation first appears and there is nothing to counteract those negative thoughts, it quickly spirals into a whirlwind of negative thoughts. The individual is left with nothing positive to counteract the negative and is instead met with a constant influx of negative thoughts. This constant confrontation of negativity will eventually lead to a negative outlook in life, which inadvertently causes an increase in suicide risk.

Bullying, whether it be online or in real life, can have devastating effects on the individual's mental health and well-being and has often been a reason for individuals to commit suicide. Being bullied leads to feelings of shame, humiliation, and powerlessness. Victims of bullying often endure long periods of emotional distress, which can lead to mental exhaustion, a sense of social exclusion and alienation. This endless torture can drive individuals to contemplate suicide as a means of escaping their problems and pain. An excellent portrayal of the potential pain bully victims have to endure is showcased in the show "The Glory". It is a show which uses both fictional and factual stories, showcasing the horrors some students must endure, inflicted by

bullying. Another popular show that gained a lot of traction was “13 reasons why”. In the show, we follow a girl who commits suicide because of bullying and extreme emotional stress and trauma. In addition to bullying, we witness the effects that physical trauma has on an individual, leading to the protagonists’ ultimate demise.

Childhood abuse, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, is a significant benefactor towards the development of suicidal ideation later in life. “Many survivors have experienced symptoms of post-traumatic stress such as flashbacks, nightmares, emotional distress and trouble sleeping.” (Abuse in care [AIC], n.d) This tells us that these experiences can manifest as a form of chronic anxiety and reminder, impairing the individual’s ability to form trusting relationships and seek help. This could potentially also lead to the individual willingly isolating themselves, which can then make them feel alone. This could in turn raise the risk of suicidal ideation, as they have nobody to turn to and are left to endure their thoughts alone.

In conclusion, social isolation, interpersonal conflicts, bullying, and abuse are interconnected factors that could actively contribute to a raised risk of suicidal behavior. These factors can lead to enhanced feelings of distress and hopelessness in affected individuals. Addressing these factors through supportive interventions, where the individual can feel loved and taken care of, as well as professional help is essential in reducing the risk of suicide and encouraging the well-being of these individuals.

Societal factors

Societal factors, such as economic hardship, discrimination, and cultural norms have a direct link to an increased suicide risk (Er et al., 2023). Economic hardship is characterized by financial instability, poverty, and low socioeconomic status. Feeling as if you are unable to advance anywhere is a downward spiral for many. This can further enhance feelings of hopelessness and despair. Being subjected to this feeling for a prolonged period is often what drives these emotions to develop and become stronger. Without proper help, support or actions to counteract these feelings, it could potentially increase the risk of suicidal ideation. There are often large

amounts of undiagnosed mental illnesses and disorders among marginalized and lower-class groups of people. Because of discrimination, poor socioeconomic status and being shunned by society in extreme cases, the prevalence of depression and other mental problems are unavoidable.

Discrimination plays a bigger role in suicidal risk than most people know. In a study published by the University of Houston it is found that “For Black adults, perceived discrimination accounted for statistically significant variance above and beyond both feelings of depression and non-discriminatory stressors in predicting suicide capability.” (Fickman, 2020). Here it is claimed that persistent experiences of discrimination and other forms of prejudice can slowly lower the individual’s self-worth and invoke feelings of depression and increase suicide capability. This also inadvertently tells us that marginalized communities are at higher risk of depressive thoughts, as they are often shown more prejudice and discrimination.

Cultural norms and societal expectations can hold an enormous impact on an individual’s mental health and perception of values. In countries such as South Korea, academic performance holds immense value “educational success is an obligation”. “Academic stress is a primary risk factor of adolescent suicide.” “Academics are held to be of utmost importance for most families and individuals” (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). Further contributing to the development of depression is the prevalent social stigma surrounding mental illnesses. In Japan, for example there has even been created a term called “Karo Jisatsu”, in other words “Overwork Suicide”. This term was created due to the overwhelming number of workers in Japan that decided to commit suicide due to work-related stress and excessive overworking (Targum & Kitanaka, 2012). There is even a forest called Aokigahara, otherwise known as “suicide forest” which is the most common area for people to commit suicide in Japan. Addressing the cultural and societal factors is essential for suicide prevention efforts, as it requires not only promoting mental health awareness but also challenging stigma and fostering supportive environments where individuals feel valued and accepted regardless of their achievements or struggles.

To conclude, it is evident that societal factors such as economic challenges, discrimination and cultural expectations significantly impact suicide risk. These influences contribute toward a negative manifestation of individuals' emotions and behaviors, effectively making them more vulnerable to suicidal ideation. Economic struggles, discrimination and societal pressure can also lead to feelings of hopelessness and isolation, making it harder for people to cope with their problems as they feel they have more limited options. Understanding these broader social influences is crucial towards developing effective strategies to prevent suicide.

Biological Factors

Genetic and neurobiological influence

The genetic and neurobiological aspects of suicidal behavior help provide important information about how biology influences our risk of suicide. Studies suggest suicidal ideation and the act of suicide may be genetically predisposed. A study researching the associations between suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in mothers and their interplay with their offspring tells us “There was a greater than 50% increase in the risk for suicidal ideation or attempt relative to offspring whose mothers had never attempted suicide.” (Lieb et al., 2005) Additionally, imbalances in certain chemicals in the brain such as “lipopolysaccharide” (Abou Chahla et al., 2023) play a role in the development of depressive symptoms. Low levels of serotonin, for example, are also linked to feelings of sadness, which can increase the risk of suicide.

Furthermore, “Suicidal completers show neurobiological abnormalities in the HPA axis and serotonergic neurotransmission of patients showcasing signs of suicidal behavior.” (Abou Chahla et al., 2023). The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) is the term used for our body's stress response system, also known as fight or flight. Disruptions in this system can lead to changes in our mood and emotional regulation. “Alterations in brain structures, such as the frontal/prefrontal cortex, have also been found in the people who died by suicide.” The amygdala and the prefrontal cortex are vital in our body's processing of emotions. Having disruptions with these vital parts of our brain can thus lead to mood disruptions and higher risk of developing mental health disorders, such as depression.

Whilst these discoveries about our genes, hormones and brains are helpful, it is important to remember that they are often only a part of a wide array of factors which contribute to the manifestation of suicidal ideation. Our genes can interact with things such as stress, how we think, and our environment to influence our chances of developing suicidal ideation or performing suicidal actions.

Physical illness’ interplay with increased suicidal risk

The relationship between chronic pain, physical illness and suicide risk is often complex and hard to pinpoint with various factors contributing to an increased vulnerability to suicidal thoughts. This prolonged discomfort can significantly impact an individual’s quality of life, emotional well-being, and mental health. Studies have shown a strong association between chronic pain such as ENS (Empty Nose Syndrome) and increased risk of suicidal ideation. As stated in the National Institute of Health “ENS patients with suicidal thoughts experienced significantly more severe symptoms, impaired quality of life, and psychological burden than those without suicidal thoughts.” Patients experiencing chronic pain experience an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and other disorders, all of which are known benefactors to suicide.

Furthermore, certain medical conditions, such as cancer or neurological disorders, have been associated with elevated suicide risk, particularly amongst those experiencing severe symptoms or functional impairment. The physical burden of these conditions, such as fatigue, disability, and decreased mobility, can further contribute to psychological distress. The emotional toll of living with a chronic illness, unsure of what the future holds, uncertainty about treatment outcomes, and to top it off, concerns about burdening loved ones, can be great contributors to exacerbating feelings of despair and increasing vulnerability to suicide and suicidal ideation.

It is essential to recognize that the relationship between chronic pain, physical illness, and suicide risk is influenced by a wide array of factors, including individual differences in coping mechanisms, support whether it be by friends, family or others, access to healthcare, and cultural

beliefs about pain and illness. Addressing the way these factors interact with one another is crucial towards mitigating the risk of suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior fostering in individuals. By understanding the way these factors interact with one another, we can come up with unique ways to tackle feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and emotional anguish caused by the complex interplay of these factors.

Reflections

What could be done differently?

Though this immense reading of previous research on this subject has given me valuable insight into the topic of suicide, there are a few things that could have been done differently to gain a deeper understanding of this subject. This research started off with me reviewing what is viewed as the biggest factors to suicide and researching these subjects individually. Instead of relying on what different sources told me were the largest contributing factors, I could have attempted to consult actual psychiatrists about this issue. Gaining information from the source and attempting to mix in professionals' opinion as well as research findings could have given me a more nuanced perspective going into this research. Many of the research findings contained different thoughts as to what counted as the "largest contributing factors", but I looked at which reasons most of these sources had in common and used them as the framework for my research. If I had used psychiatrists' opinions on this matter, it could have provided me with a more trustworthy and stable framework to base my work on.

Future

Conducting this research project in an attempt to grant readers a deeper understanding of the complexity of suicide has in turn given me a far greater understanding of the subject as a whole. Suicide is an extremely broad and relevant subject, especially in today's society where social media plays a huge role in conveying both negative and positive information with the simple tap of a finger. This project grants us a deeper insight into why individuals may choose to commit suicide, but not nearly as much insight into how to prevent these thoughts from ever occurring.

Further research in this topic could help discover different ways to mitigate the risk of suicide and suicidal ideation manifesting.

Conclusion

As this project does not have a traditional conclusion, it instead serves as a reminder that there is no single reason as to why someone would choose to take their own life. Rather, it is often a combination of different factors that come together in unique ways and begin to form these thoughts, which eventually progresses to suicidal ideation or the possible act of suicide. It is important to note that everybody has a unique experience regarding the development of suicidal ideation. Therefore, this project aims to enlighten the reader to the possible benefactors which could contribute to this phenomenon. Understanding these complexities is crucial in terms of developing effective prevention strategies. By leveraging research and awareness efforts, we can strive to create support systems and preventive measures. While this essay may not offer a definitive conclusion, it aims to deepen understanding and encourage action towards suicide prevention.

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