



Suicide As A Contaminated Sympathetic Disease.

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Abstract

The concept of "suicide as a contaminated sympathetic disease" introduces a new paradigm for understanding the propagation of suicidal ideation and behavior through social, environmental, and emotional factors. This conceptualization suggests that suicide can spread much like a contagious disease, affecting those who are emotionally and psychologically susceptible. By examining the mechanisms of social influence, empathy, and media impact, this framework aims to deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding suicide contagion. The paper highlights the need for comprehensive preventive measures, including responsible media reporting, targeted community interventions, and systemic support for at-risk populations.

Introduction

Suicide remains a significant public health concern, with complex etiology involving a myriad of individual, social, and environmental factors. While traditional models of suicide focus on personal vulnerabilities such as mental illness, trauma, and genetic predisposition, the role of social and cultural dynamics in exacerbating suicide risk has gained attention in recent years. The term "suicide as a contaminated sympathetic disease" offers a lens to view suicide as not merely an individual tragedy but as a phenomenon capable of spreading within communities, driven by shared emotional and psychological processes. This framework draws parallels between suicide contagion and the spread of infectious diseases, emphasizing the role of emotional resonance, media influence, and peer dynamics in the transmission of suicidal behaviors.

Werther Effect

The **Werther Effect** refers to a social phenomenon where a spike in suicides occurs after a widely publicized suicide, often mirroring the methods or circumstances of the initial incident. The term originates from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's novel "The Sorrows of Young Werther," published in 1774. In the story, the protagonist, Werther, takes his own life due to unrequited love, leading to a wave of copycat suicides among young men who identified with Werther's plight.

Examples:

1. **Literary Influence:** After the novel's publication, numerous young men who were influenced by Werther's story took their own lives in a similar fashion, even dressing like him and using the same method of suicide.
2. **Celebrity Suicides:** When a famous personality dies by suicide, there is often an increase in suicide rates among the general population. The details of the celebrity's suicide can lead others, especially those who identify with them, to view suicide as an acceptable solution to their problems.
3. **Media Reporting:** Extensive media coverage of a suicide can trigger the Werther Effect. For example, if the media reports in detail about a person who jumped in front of a train, this can lead to an increase in similar incidents in the following days or weeks.

Consequences:

To prevent the Werther Effect, media outlets are often advised to follow guidelines when reporting on suicides. These include avoiding sensationalizing the act, not providing specific details about the method, and offering information about where people can seek help. The goal is to prevent suicide from being perceived as a normative or even heroic act by vulnerable individuals.

Papageno Effect

The Papageno Effect refers to the positive impact that media and social interventions can have in preventing suicide by promoting help-seeking behaviors and showcasing coping strategies. The term is derived from the character Papageno in Mozart's opera "The Magic Flute." In the story, Papageno contemplates suicide when he believes he has lost his love, but he is stopped by three other characters who remind him of the positive aspects of life and offer him support. This encourages Papageno to reconsider and choose life.

Examples:

1. **Mental Health Support:** When individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts are encouraged to seek help from counselors or mental health professionals, it exemplifies the Papageno Effect. Positive messaging and support can help them find hope and alternatives to suicide.
2. **Responsible Media Reporting:** Media can play a crucial role by sharing stories of individuals who have overcome suicidal thoughts through support and intervention. Reporting on the availability of crisis support services, hotlines, and mental health resources instead of focusing solely on the act of suicide can provide hope and reduce the risk of suicide contagion.
3. **Support Groups and Peer Networks:** Support groups or communities where people can share their struggles and receive encouragement from others who have faced similar challenges can embody the Papageno Effect. This kind of positive peer support can help individuals see that they are not alone and that there are ways to cope with their problems.

Impact:

The Papageno Effect demonstrates the importance of highlighting coping mechanisms, support systems, and positive alternatives in media and social interactions to reduce the likelihood of suicide. It emphasizes that presenting hope, resilience, and effective strategies for dealing with life's challenges can be a powerful tool in suicide prevention.

Theoretical Framework

1. Contamination and Social Transmission: The Epidemiology of Suicidal Behavior

The analogy of "contamination" suggests that suicidal ideation and behaviors can be transmitted through exposure to others' suicidal actions or deaths, akin to how infectious diseases spread through contact with contaminated sources (Stack, 2005). Suicide clusters, where multiple suicides occur within a community or among individuals linked by social connections, exemplify this phenomenon (Gould & Lake, 2013).

2. Sympathetic Identification and Emotional Contagion

Emotional contagion is the process by which emotions spread from person to person, often unconsciously (Hatfield et al., 1993). Individuals who are highly empathetic or share similar vulnerabilities may be more susceptible to adopting suicidal thoughts when exposed to others' suffering (Joiner, 2005). This sympathetic identification can lead to a form of "emotional mirroring," where individuals internalize the distress of others and develop similar suicidal tendencies (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994).

3. Media Influence and the Werther Effect

The impact of media on suicide rates has been well-documented, particularly through the concept of the "Werther Effect," where media portrayals of suicide lead to increased suicides (Phillips, 1974). Studies show that sensationalized or detailed reporting of suicide can trigger copycat suicides, especially among vulnerable populations (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012). This influence can be exacerbated by social media, where information spreads rapidly and is difficult to regulate (Luxton et al., 2012).

4. The Papageno Effect: A Counter-Narrative

In contrast to the Werther Effect, the Papageno Effect refers to the positive impact of media that responsibly reports on suicide by highlighting stories of hope and recovery (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010). The term is derived from a character in Mozart's opera *The Magic Flute*, who contemplates suicide but is deterred by friends. This effect underscores the potential of media to reduce suicide risk by promoting help-seeking behavior and resilience.

Mechanisms of Spread

1. Social Contagion and Peer Influence

Social contagion theory posits that behaviors, attitudes, and emotions can spread within social networks (Christakis & Fowler, 2013). Adolescents and young adults are particularly susceptible to peer influence, where the suicide of one member can lead to a cascade of similar behaviors within the group (Bearman & Moody, 2004). This is often observed in high schools and colleges, where the death of a peer can trigger multiple suicides or attempts in a short span (Insel & Gould, 2008).

2. Imitative Behavior and Psychological Identification

Psychological identification with a suicidal individual can lead to imitative behavior, particularly when the individual is perceived as a role model or shares similar struggles (Stack, 2000). This phenomenon is not limited to personal relationships but extends to celebrities and public figures, whose suicides can trigger spikes in suicide rates (Gould et al., 2003).

3. The Role of Online Communities

Online communities and forums have created new platforms for the spread of suicidal ideation. Research indicates that individuals who frequent suicide-themed forums are at increased risk of adopting suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Luxton et al., 2012). These communities often reinforce negative beliefs and provide detailed information on suicide methods, which can act as a catalyst for those contemplating suicide (Baume et al., 1997).

Prevention and Intervention Strategies

1. Media Guidelines and Responsible Reporting

Media plays a crucial role in either exacerbating or mitigating suicide contagion. Guidelines for responsible reporting include avoiding sensationalism, omitting details of the suicide method, and providing information on crisis resources (Pirkis et al., 2006). The adoption of these guidelines has been shown to reduce the incidence of copycat suicides (Fekete & Hafner, 2006).

2. School-Based Interventions and Peer Support Programs

Schools and universities are critical settings for suicide prevention, particularly in the wake of a peer's suicide. Programs that provide peer support, crisis counseling, and mental health education can significantly reduce the risk of further suicides (Wyman et al., 2010). Training students and staff to recognize warning signs and respond appropriately is essential in creating a supportive environment.

3. Community Awareness and Support Networks

Community-based interventions that educate the public about suicide risk factors, warning signs, and the impact of suicide contagion are vital. Establishing support networks for those affected by suicide, such as survivors of suicide loss, can help mitigate the risk of further suicides (Gould et al., 2014).

4. Policy and Legal Interventions

Implementing policies that restrict access to means of suicide, such as firearms and toxic substances, has been shown to reduce suicide rates (Mann et al., 2005). Legal measures that hold media outlets accountable for irresponsible reporting may also be considered as part of a comprehensive prevention strategy (Pirkis & Blood, 2001).

Conclusion

The conceptualization of "suicide as a contaminated sympathetic disease" provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the social and emotional transmission of suicidal behavior. By recognizing the role of empathy, social influence, and cultural narratives, this model underscores the need for a multifaceted approach to suicide prevention. This includes responsible media practices, community education, targeted interventions, and policy measures aimed at reducing the risk of suicide contagion. Addressing the broader sociocultural dynamics that contribute to suicide is essential for preventing the spread of this tragic and preventable phenomenon.

Questionnaire

Title: Exploring Suicide as a Contaminated Sympathetic Disease

Instructions: The following questions are designed to understand the concept of suicide contagion, or how suicidal behaviors may spread through emotional and social influences. Please respond honestly to each question.

Demographic Information:

1. Name: _____

2. Gender:

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Other

3. Age: _____

4. Occupation: _____

5. Locality: _____

6. Income Level (Monthly):

- a) Below ₹25,000
- b) ₹25,000 – ₹50,000
- c) ₹50,000 – ₹1,00,000
- d) Above ₹1,00,000

Section A: Personal Understanding and Emotional Impact of Suicide Contagion

1. Have you ever heard of the term "suicide contagion"?

- a) Yes
- b) No

2. Do you believe that suicide can spread through social influence (media, social networks, etc.)?

- a) Strongly Agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neutral
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly Disagree

3. Do you think media coverage of suicides can lead to an increase in similar behaviors in society?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Not Sure

4. Have you personally known someone whose suicide affected others' mental health or behavior in your community?

- a) Yes
- b) No

5. When you hear about a suicide, how often do you feel personally affected?

- a) Always
- b) Sometimes
- c) Rarely
- d) Never

Section B: Sympathetic and Emotional Influence

6. Do you believe that hearing about a friend's or family member's suicide increases the likelihood of others in the community considering similar actions?

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Unsure

7. How strongly do you feel empathy for individuals who commit suicide?

- a) Very Strong
- b) Strong
- c) Moderate
- d) Weak
- e) None

Section C: Media and Social Influence

8. In your opinion, does social media contribute to a "contamination" effect where suicidal behaviors spread among users?

- a) Strongly Agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neutral
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly Disagree

9. Have you ever come across discussions or posts about suicide on social media that affected your thoughts or emotions negatively?

- a) Yes
- b) No

Section D: Preventive Measures

10. Do you think that controlling media coverage of suicides can help reduce the spread of suicidal behavior?

- a) Strongly Agree
- b) Agree
- c) Neutral
- d) Disagree
- e) Strongly Disagree

11. Do you believe mental health education and support networks can reduce suicide contagion in communities?

- a) Yes
- b) No

12. What, in your opinion, is the most effective way to prevent suicide contagion?

- a) Mental health awareness
- b) Restricting media coverage
- c) Stronger social support
- d) Other (please specify): _____

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