Media influences on suicidal behaviour: An interview study of young people in New Zealand

This study contributes to the evidence about the relevance of media to suicide for young people, particularly for those at risk of suicide. The study was completed as part of the implementation of the Ministry of Health’s New Zealand Suicide Prevention Action Plan 2008–2012.

Why collect this information?
It is known that certain types of media reports and portrayals of suicide and self-harm can increase the risk of suicidal behaviours in vulnerable people, especially young people. It has been suggested that the proliferation and evolution of newer forms of media content, combined with the development of technologies which make rapid access, content sharing and person-to-person communication possible with relative ease, may contribute to suicidal behaviours.

Who undertook this study?
This research was completed under contract for Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, the National Centre for Mental Health Research, Information and Workforce Development, by the Social Psychiatry and Population Mental Health Research Unit at the University of Otago, Wellington.

What methodology was used?
This was a descriptive cross-sectional study based on a clinical sample of young people from two geographical locations across three district health board catchments, namely Counties Manukau, Capital and Coast, and Hutt Valley. The sample consisted of 56 female and 15 male (N=71) young people between 13 and 25 years of age, of whom 60 per cent were European, 15.5 per cent Maori, 7 per cent Pacific and 8.5 per cent other ethnicities. Participants had presented to mental health services, and had intentionally harmed themselves in the previous 3 months. Participants were asked to report where they first learnt that people sometimes harmed or kill themselves, and for their views on the influence of the media on suicidal behaviours.

What were the findings of the study?
For most, the motives for self-harm were to escape their current situation and gain some form of control. Sources of information differed by gender, with females citing television news/documentaries, school/teachers and friends while males responded that school/teachers were the most common source. Television, movies, the internet and songs and music videos were the most common source of any media exposure to portrayals of suicidal behaviours. Sixty-six participants used one or more social

---

1 In this report the term ‘suicidal behaviours’ includes self-injurious behaviours with and without suicidal intent
networking site(s), and twenty-seven participants had accessed suicide or self-harm-related material from these sources. Few participants reported using the internet to meet others who self-harm. Forty-nine participants had been exposed to suicide and self-harm themes via music and music videos. While some felt it had nil or minimal impact, or was a “release” for distressing feelings, a small number recognised some music as “trigger songs”, which led them to self-harm.

All other media were cited much less frequently as sources of exposure to suicidal behaviours. Media such as the internet and mobile phone were rare first sources of knowledge about suicidal behaviours, and it appears that at least among young people with clinically significant self-harm, emerging media are used for gaining or sharing information, rather than being a specific risk due to introducing self-harm or suicide as a novel idea to young people. Participants saw their use of interactive media-related technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet, as supports for themselves and others.

Participants strongly felt that media had a key role to play in self-harm prevention, and identified a number of ways that media could help. They asked for clearer warnings on TV programmes and movies that contained disturbing materials and those who found that the images and media acted as triggers for their self-harm behaviour preferred that these were censored before being broadcast. There was also a strong call for toning down the graphic nature of portrayals of suicide and self-harming in media. Participants also asked for safer reporting of suicides, including reducing the glorified ways celebrity self-harm and suicides were portrayed. They asked for better awareness and support campaigns so that young people were aware of different avenues for seeking help. Some asked for media to show the effects of self-harm and suicides on families; others wanted to see stories of people in recovery who had overcome self-harming.

**Recommendations about future media involvement with suicide prevention:**

The viewpoints and experiences of the young people in the study suggest that the media have a key role to play in self-harm prevention. Current guidelines for the safe reporting of suicide and self-harm appear to be supported by the study participants.

People have ready access to a wider range of media content on suicide and self-harm than ever before. Much of the content is not monitored or regulated. However, there are still opportunities for prevention through policies and programmes that support education and skill development among young people, so that they become better equipped to manage their use of and responses to such material and to seek help for themselves and their peers when appropriate.

Young people prize their ready access to information and to diverse ways of social participation. Their level of engagement with media provides us with opportunities to develop innovative approaches to suicide prevention.

**Key contact**

Jane Vanderpyl
Research and Evaluation Manager,
Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui
(09) 300 6776

**For the most up-to-date information on this project, please visit www.tepou.co.nz.**