Deaf Students & Suicide: The Peculiar Relationship of Gender, Reading & Suicide

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To estimate the rate of reported suicide ideation and suicide attempts in deaf and hard-of-hearing college-entering young adults, and to identify gender, reading, and suicide correlates.

Method: 166 college entering deaf and hard-of-hearing students and 576 college entering hearing students took the National Center for Deaf Health Research (NCDHR) Health Behavior Survey (HBS). The English language of the HBS was designed to be understood by deaf and hard-of-hearing college students. One survey item asked respondents if they had thought about committing suicide in the past 12 months (suicide ideation) and one asked how often they really attempted to commit suicide in the past 12 months (suicide attempts).

Results: Deaf and hard-of-hearing students and hearing students reported equivalent suicide ideation rates. Deaf and hard-of-hearing women reported a significantly higher suicide attempt rate than hearing women. Deaf and hard-of-hearing men and hearing men reported equivalent suicide attempt rates. Lower reading comprehension skill was associated with an increased rate of reported suicide ideation and reported suicide attempts for deaf and hard-of-hearing women, but not men. Reading skill, reported mental health risk factors, and suicide ideation rates for deaf and hard-of-hearing young adults at risk for attempted suicide.

INTRODUCTION

Previous survey data suggests that deaf and hard-of-hearing college students have a relatively high previous-year suicide attempt rate (6%-18%; Turner et al., 2006). However, these surveys did not control the English language difficulty of their items or their respondents’ reading skills. Deaf and hard-of-hearing respondents could have misunderstood survey items due to weak reading skills and reported falsely elevated suicide attempt rates.

METHOD

HBS Survey Construction

Survey Scope: 71 items about physical/mental health, demographics, and communication traits.

Survey Item Selection: From national health surveys; bilingual health professionals and deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

English Content Modification: Maximized comprehension for the typical range of reading skills of college entering deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

Procedure: NCDHR researchers and NTID teachers with expertise in English language, reading, and modified the English structure and vocabulary of each item.

HBS Survey Items Used In This Study

Suicide Ideation Item

During the past 12 months, did you ever think about killing yourself?

Suicide Attempt Item

During the past 12 months, how many times did you really try to kill yourself?

Mental Health Correlates

Figure 2: Relationship of Reported Suicide Ideation To Suicide Attempts

All groups: Respondents who reported thinking about suicide within the 12 months prior to the survey also reported more suicide attempts within those 12 months (*, p < .05).

Figure 3: Suicide Ideation

Deaf and hard-of-hearing women reported: Significantly higher suicide ideation rate at a rate equivalent to hearing women. 3.3 times higher suicide attempt rate than hearing women (*, p = .008).

Deaf and hard-of-hearing men reported:

• Equivalent suicide ideation rates as hearing men.

Figure 4: Suicide Attempts

Deaf and hard-of-hearing women reported:

• Reported suicide attempt rate decreased as California Reading Comprehension increased (p = .056). Deaf and hard-of-hearing men:

• Reported suicide ideation rate was not related to reading.

Figure 5: Relationship of Suicide Ideation To Suicide Attempts

All groups: Respondents who reported thinking about suicide within the 12 months prior to the survey also reported more suicide attempts within those 12 months (*, p < .05).

Figure 6: Depression & Suicidal Ideation

Suicide ideation rates increased as reported substance use increased (p's < .01).

Figure 7: Suicide Ideation & Suicidal Ideation

Finding: Deaf and hard-of-hearing young adults at college entry have an increased reported suicide ideation rate compared on the HBS (2.7 times greater) compared with hearing young adults.

Figure 8: Reported Substance Use vs. Suicide Attempts

Summary and Conclusions

Deaf and hard-of-hearing women and hearing women: Reported suicide attempt rate increased as reported suicide ideation rate increased (*, p = .005).

Deaf and hard-of-hearing men and hearing men: Reported suicide attempt rate was not related to reported suicide.

Findings:

• Deaf and hard-of-hearing women who reported increased reading skill had progressively lower rates of reported suicide ideation and suicide attempts, while men did not.

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Deaf and hard-of-hearing women with the lowest reading skill at college entry may be at increased risk for attempted suicide.

Findings:

• Deaf and hard-of-hearing women with the lowest reading skill at college entry may be at increased risk for attempted suicide.

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References