

## Perceived Causes of Suicide, Reasons for Living and Suicidal Ideation among Students

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The present study investigated the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that could evoke suicidal ideation among female college students. Content analysis (Berelson's Method) of interview of 120 female college students revealed four broad factors leading to suicidal ideation namely, Academic, Interpersonal, and Environment related. Events like public embarrassment due to some freaky incident, harassment, rape and being jilted in love were relatively more important while events like death of a loved one and acute financial crisis were found relatively less significant for this sample. Further, the adult suicidal ideation questionnaire has been administered to them to assess the frequency of occurrence of suicidal thought within the past one month. Results revealed that about 12.5% of the students had high suicidal ideation. Reasons for living (total score) has been found to have negative but significant relation to suicidal thought. Concern for future and moral objections is found to be strongly and negatively related to suicidal thought. This study reveals that a strong and positive reasons for living is useful in preventing suicide. Moreover the findings are relevant for therapist and counsellors in assessing suicidal risks.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Suicidal ideation, Suicidal thought

**S**uicide is one of the main causes of death among college students. Recent reports have suggested that the prevalence of suicide in this group increased 8% from 2003 to 2004 (Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). National Crime Bureau (2005) also report majority of suicides (37.8%) in India are by those below the age of 30 years. Thus, college campuses represent an important point of intervention for the prevention of suicide for many young adults (Muehlenkamp, Marrone, Gray & Brown, 2009).

College authorities and teachers on college campuses today are often perplexed as to the best way to deal with suicidal students. This is because suicide among college and university students is a problem of complex dimensions that impacts many people: survivors, teachers, authorities and parents. In a study in Delhi, suicidal ideation rate among adolescents was found to be

21.7% (Jena & Sidhartha, 2004). Urgency of in-depth understanding of suicide in India has been emphasized by Vijay Kumar (2007) as well as by Kjoller and Helwegharsen (2000) and Mazza (2000). Dogra, Basu and Das (2008) found that except stressful life events, other predictor variables, i.e., personality, presence of meaning in life, reasons for living, contribute significantly to suicidal ideation. Another interesting aspect of the literature related with suicide is that while risk factors like hopelessness and loneliness have been extensively studied (Lubin et al., 2001; Billici et al., 2002; Ozguven & Sayil, 2003), increasing concern on prophylactic factors like reasons for living are being emphasized more in recent years. In recent studies it has been shown that reasons for living concept is an important cognitive factor which plays an important role in suicidal behaviour in both adolescents and elderly people (Bender,

2000). According to cognitive theory, suicide is thought to be an exit of hopelessness and despair and if a person is full of hopelessness, suicidal risks increases significantly (Minkoff et al, 1973). Thus, the current focus seems to be more on the positive and preventive aspect of suicide rather than on the negative hindsight.

**Suicidal Ideation:** Specifically, the thoughts and cognition about suicidal behaviours and intent may be considered an early marker for the risk of more serious suicidal behaviours (Bonner & Rich, 1987; Fawcett, 1988). Suicidal ideation has also been viewed as a basic component in the classification of suicidal behaviours. The construct of suicidal ideation is defined as the domain of thoughts and ideas about death, suicide and serious self-injurious behaviours and includes thought related to the planning, conduct and outcome of suicidal behaviour, particularly as the last relates to the thoughts about a response of others (Reynolds, 1988). Suicidal ideation can be operationalised on a continuum of severity. Along with this continuum, suicidal ideation can be characterized as ranging from relatively mild, general thought and wishes that one were dead, to serious ideation about specific plans and means of taking one's life. Thoughts dealing with the reactions of others, including others' perception of the suicidal individual's self-worth when he or she is dead are cognitions within this domain.

Reasons for living ideals with positive cognitions help in avoiding suicides. Though the reasons may either be positive or negative but all of them help in avoiding suicidal behaviour. In the current study, an attempt has been taken to study the events evoking suicidal ideation, its frequency and the relationship between suicidal ideation and reason for living among female college students. Specifically, the hypotheses are:

1. Life events evoking suicidal thought differ among themselves.

2. Reasons for living is associated negatively with suicidal ideation.

### Method

#### Sample:

A sample of 120 female college students were selected from six undergraduate colleges of Howrah and six from Kolkata (Colleges selected from North, South and Central Zones) from Science, Humanities and Commerce Stream from 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> years respectively and with consultation to the respective college authorities and individual students concern. The mean age was 20.12 years and SD  $\pm$  2.09.

**Exclusion criteria** are Students with physical handicaps, Students with past psychiatric illness and Students not willing to answer all the questions of the questionnaire

#### Tools:

**Adult Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ)** of William Reynolds (1988) consists of 25 items. The respondent rates each ASIQ item on a 7-point scale, which assesses the frequency of occurrence within the past month. The scale ranges from '0' (I never had this thought) to '6' (Almost Everyday). The total score is obtained by summing the point value of the item responses. The reliability of the ASIQ was investigated using Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha (0.95) an index of internal consistency reliability as well as test-retest reliability. The test-retest reliability of the ASIQ in college student was 0.86.

**College Students Reasons for Living Inventory (CSRFLI)** (Westefeld *et al.*, 1992) was also used. It is a self-report type questionnaire that measures the reason why some one would decide to continue to live, even if they were contemplating suicide. The CSRFLI is made up of 46 items, which form six subscales, and each item appears on only one subscale. The respondents rate each item ranging from (1) not at all important to 6 (extremely important). The coefficient alpha estimates for the instrument subscales were

reported to range from 0.64 to 0.86.

A semi-structured interview session was conducted to enlist the life events provoking suicidal thoughts after thoroughly interviewing 120 college students the content analysis of the interview was done following Berelson's method and considering two expert's views, from the themes formed, the final list of life events were prepared which were classified into four broad categories viz Environmental, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Academic and Career related. This list was again administered to 120 fresh college students to assess their relative importance.

### Procedure

In the first stage for recording the events evoking suicidal ideation data was collected through open-ended interview. Each interview took place in a private chamber where no one except the interviewer and interviewee had an access. The interviewee was asked to report the life events that evoked suicidal ideation. The interviewer recorded the answers in a cassette recorder.

### Results

**Table 1. Life events leading to suicidal thought of female students (N=120)**

Environmental Life events	%	Relative Importance
1 Severe sexual harassment and rape	72	01
2 Being jilted in love	63	02
3 Death of a over done	19	12
4 Acute financial crisis	13	13
Interpersonal		
5 Conflict with parents	51	03
6 Conflict with lover	47	07
Intrapersonal		
7 Rejection	33	08
8 Loneliness	27	09
9 Insult in a public place	23	10
10 After an immoral act	20	11
11 Incurable disease	35	07
Academic and Career Related		
12 Failure in the examination		
13 Lower marks than expected	39	06

Table-1 indicates that incidents like severe sexual harassment including rape and being jilted in love is significantly more important in provoking suicidal ideation, while rejection and failure in examination is moderately significant and incidents like acute financial crisis and commitment of an immoral act is less significant in provoking suicidal thoughts. The means and standard deviations of the ASIQ and CSRFLI variables were also calculated. It was observed that the Mean and SD of suicidal ideation was 3.09 and 0.98 respectively. Among the six subscales of CSRFLI, the Means and SD of Survival and coping belief were 2.62 and 0.67, for college future related concern 4.11 and 1.12, for moral objection 1.45 and 0.93, for responsibility to friends and family 3.10 and 1.43, for fear of suicide 1.99 and 0.88, and for fear of social disapproval 3.97 and 1.32 respectively. Subsequently correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the relationship between suicidal ideation and reason for living.

**Table 2. Correlation of ASIQ with CSRFLI subscales and total score**

Sl. No.	Sub-Scale	r
1	Survival and coping belief	-0.140
2	Future related concern	-0.209*
3	Moral objection	-0.236*
4	Responsibility to friends and family	-0.077
5	Fear of suicide	-0.071
6	Fear of social disapproval	-0.092
	ASIQ and CSRFLI (total score)	-0.264*

\*p<0.05

Table-2 indicates that greater the reasons for living, less is suicidal ideation among the college students. It also indicates that in the present sample suicidal ideation decreases with increased concern for future and moral objection, but is unrelated to survival beliefs, responsibility to friends and family, fear of suicide and fear of social disapproval.

### Discussion

The college students reported a number of events that evoked suicidal ideation

(Table 1). The events were related to environmental, interpersonal, intrapersonal as well as academic and career issues. Thus the findings support hypothesis-1, that the life events evoking suicidal thoughts will differ in severity. The highest rated event was sexual harassment and being jilted in love, moderately important were failure in examination or lower marks than expected. Thus the issues of sex and romantic relationship seems to be significant. Sex-liberalization was practiced in ancient India, later to be replaced by Victorian views of sex in colonial India. To some extent it remains so till date, though globalization has had some effect. The results suggest that the sample of middle class Bengali U.G. students feel sexual harassment as stigmatised. Culture has a significant role in suicidal interpretation (Lieberman, 2003). Chandler and Paroulox (2006) found relationship between cultural continuity and youth suicide risk. Probably, from the perspective of participants, sexual harassment leads to egoistic suicidal thought, by way of feeling of disintegration and isolation from the society. It is a matter of immense shame and trauma to them, unacceptable to self and society. This incident is highly stressful. Dhar and Basu (2006) observed that stressful life events differentiate between high and low suicidal college students, but the findings are moderated by personality characteristics like ego function. Stress has been found a significant event for suicidal thought.

Being jilted in love also brings depression and hopelessness leading to suicidal ideation. This is with line with Furr, Westefeld, McConnell and Jenkin (2001) who found conflict with boy friend/girl friend as major cause of suicide. Conflict with parents was also found to be a less significant nevertheless contributing factor. Here also the role of interconnected Indian culture, where parents play a significant role, in the life of U.G. college students (Chatterjee, 2008) is confirmed. Academic problems have always been a

cause of suicide for college students. Similar findings were reported by Bernard and Bernard (1982), Schotte and Clum (1982).

The suicidal rates are different for each country, but the increase among young people is very prominent everywhere (Lubin *et al.*, 2001; Bilic *et al.*, 2002). The same situation is valid for suicidal thoughts as well (Kjoller *et al.*, 2000; Mazza, 2000). Thus an increasing concern on prophylactic factors like reason for living is an important concern. College students' reason for living was found negatively and significantly related to suicidal ideation (Table 3 and 4). This is in support to the second hypothesis. Thus inadequate reason for living might be a cause of suicide. This has also been reported by Westfeld, Cardin and Deaton (1992). Reason for living concept has an important cognitive factor, which plays a role in suicidal behaviour in adolescents (Bender, 2000).

Analysis of CSRFLI subscales in relation to ASIQ score (Table 4) reveals that a goal, a concern for future and moral objection are valuable factors in preventing suicide and providing preventive counselling. Indian and Bengali culture and its values play a significant role in evoking suicidal thought. The present study found significant evidence of the contribution of a meaning in life in preventing suicidal thoughts and absence of which intensifies suicidal tendencies. Studies indicate that attending college or university is commonly viewed as an individualistic goal. Success in college has many positive effects, such as giving individuals the sense that they are benefiting from past work, they are being successful members of the society and that there are hopes and plans for their future. The results of this study suggest the college student's positive benefits of college attendance. This could explain why college may be a protective factor and the hopeful orientation that college and future career option afford. It also explains that students are able to maintain and strengthen their self-identity through their role as college students.

Bonner and Rich (1991) conceptualised deficit reason for living (along with loneliness and irrational beliefs) as vulnerability factors that would interact with negative life stress to predict hopelessness, independent of depressed mood. Mascaro and Rosen (2005) conceptualised that deficit existential meaning is vulnerable predictor of suicidal ideation. Connell and Meyer (1992) found that significant difference existed between suicidal and non-suicidal individuals on the Reasons for Living. It was further found that there existed a sense of determination and efficacy with respect to generating plans for goal attainment, which thus predicted the strength of the reason for living available to an individual at any given point of time (Mehrotra, 1998). The present findings corroborate the earlier studies.

A question may arise as to why survival beliefs, responsibility towards family and friends, fear of suicide and fear of social disapproval were not significantly correlated with suicidal ideation. A possible reason may be that the participants are college students of middle class families mostly residing with their parents and need not necessarily take too much responsibility as yet.

Therefore, the sense of responsibility and empathy with others are not yet actualised in them but fear of disapproval from others is significant probably for the same reason. Fear of suicide probably becomes prominent only when attempt is contemplated very seriously. Since there is no history of suicide on the part of the present students, fear of suicide is probably not a significant factor. Inculcating a strong meaning of life, future concerns and spiritual development is effective in preventing suicide. Religion has been observed as a protective factor against suicide in India (Vijay Kumar, 2002). Therefore, along with remedial mode, emphasis should be given to prevention programmes (Batigun, 2005). Students' resource network, have been observed to be beneficial in the past and is still significant. Supporting Furr, Westefeld, McConnell and

Jenkins (2001), an effective suicide prevention programme on a college campus should focus on three areas: (a) warning signs, (b) what to do if one is concerned about some one, and (c) discussion and identification of local resources. It is crucial for psychologists on college campuses to be proactive as well as reactive – in addressing this mental health phenomenon. As the culture, values and beliefs also play a significant role, these should be given due importance. Further research can be undertaken to study the role of culture, values and beliefs in moderating suicide.

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