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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Impact of Peer Suicide During Adolescence on Mental Health: An
Adult Perspective

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The Impact of Peer Suicide During Adolescence on Mental Health: An Adult Perspective

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University Honors Program

Capstone Project

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Abstract

Problem: Initial interventions after the suicide of adolescents typically focus on those directly impacted by the death, however, little is known about the impact the suicide of a peer can have on adolescents, regardless of their relationship with the decedent. This study aims to understand how peer suicide has affected adolescents and to find resources that would help address their future mental health concerns.

Method: A qualitative study was conducted consisting of interviews with four adults between the ages of 20 to 23 and six questions were asked of the participants surrounding their experiences with peer suicide during adolescence.

Findings: There were initial feelings of shock, sadness, and disbelief in the immediate period after the suicide of a peer. Family and friends were the biggest factors in coping with the loss of a peer. The death by suicide of a peer emphasized the importance of mental health as a whole. Resources such as therapy, long-term follow ups, and prevention efforts would have been beneficial after the suicide of a peer.

Conclusion: Adolescents can use this information to assist in coping with the loss of a peer and nurses and other health care professionals can use this information to better address their patients' mental health concerns when they have experienced a loss due to suicide.

Introduction

Suicide among adolescents is, unfortunately, very relevant today as it is the second leading cause of death between those ages 15 to 19 (CDC, 2020). The suicide rates among 15 to 19-year olds in 2017 increased to its highest point since 2000, with the biggest increase being in the male population (Miron et al, 2019). With each suicide, comes a large number of people affected and in need of mental health support. In a given year, one in 20 adolescents experience the loss of someone due to suicide and one in five lose someone before they reach adulthood. (Andriessen et al, 2020). More than 13% of adolescent suicides can be caused by clustering, in which an exposure to suicide influences suicidality in peers (Swanson & Colman, 2013). Therefore, it would be beneficial to understand the impact that peer suicide has on adolescents in order to support them in the process of coping with the loss of their peer and to potentially prevent clustering of suicidality.

Review of Literature

Often times when a suicide occurs, immediate thoughts and interventions go to the family and close friends that are directly impacted by the death. Something frequently overlooked, is how the suicide of a peer can impact individuals whether they were close to the victim or not. In reviewing the literature, there were four articles specifically related to adolescents and their experiences with peer suicide (Andriessen et al, 2020; Balk et al, 2011; Feigelman & Gorman, 2008; & Swanson & Colman, 2013).

A study by Andriessen et al. (2020) includes interviews from both adolescents who experienced death by trauma or suicide, and their parents. There were three main findings from the article related to the bereavement experiences of adolescents: death is a life-changing experience, the death differentiated them from peers, and the death impacted the family system.

A majority of the adolescent participants had immediate reactions of guilt, betrayal, anger, worries about how the death would impact others, as well as a lot of “why” questions. All of the adolescents had long-term effects associated with the loss of their peer, both negative and positive. Mental health issues were a common negative effect and personal growth was a positive effect that was experienced. The article also mentions that death by suicide impacts adolescents’ grieving differently; there are more feelings of shock, anger, self-blame, depression, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation.

Balk et al. (2011) is an article focused on the grief support system for adolescents that should be in place after a peer’s death. It revolves around finding support in six domains: physical, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual. The domains create a holistic approach to helping the adolescents cope. The death of a peer during adolescence was defined as a “non-normative” event, meaning because the death of an adolescent is not a typical occurrence, the bereavement process is different than it normally would be. The article also emphasizes that parental and school involvement are essential in the coping process.

The article by Feigelman & Gorman (2008) studied the correlations between peer suicide and youth suicide. Within the study, it was found that there were higher rates of depression, drug use, and suicidal thoughts for adolescents who had a friend that completed suicide compared to peers who did not. The study also found profound evidence that in the immediate period after a friend’s suicide, there is a greater impact on suicidal thinking and attempts. The article concluded that immediately following a peer’s suicide, there should be risk screenings and mental health resources offered to those affected.

Swanson & Colman (2013) investigated whether exposure to suicide leads to suicidal ideations or attempts in children. It found that youth who were exposed to suicide were more

likely to experience suicidality in all age groups. It was suggested in the article that school and community interventions aimed at adolescents who were associated with the decedent, would be vital.

The articles indicate that adolescents who experience the loss of a peer due to suicide are more likely to have lasting effects including depression, substance abuse, and suicidal ideations. Therefore, it would be important to understand what these adolescents are thinking and feeling after the loss of their peer and to know which resources would be beneficial for them to gain healthy coping skills and maintain their mental well-being. This study aims to find out the mental health effects of peer suicide from adults who experienced it when they were adolescents and to understand which resources were or would have been beneficial to them at that time.

Method

This is a qualitative study composed of interviews with four adults that were recruited by email. These interviews took place via Zoom. Approval by Northern Illinois University's Institutional Review Board was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Informed consent including the associated risks and benefits of the study was given prior to the conduction of the interviews. The participants were between the ages of 20 to 23 and all of them had experienced the death by suicide of a peer while in high school and as adolescents. Each participant was asked six questions regarding their feelings around the loss of their peer as an adolescent. The first question of the interview was "How old were you when you experienced the loss of a peer due to suicide and how did you know the person?" The following two questions asked about the participants' initial feelings when they heard about the loss of their peer, how they coped, and what support they were given at the time. The participants were also asked, looking back on their adolescence, how they think the loss of their peer impacted their mental

health. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked what additional mental health resources would have benefitted them after the loss of their peer.

Results

After conducting the study, four themes emerged. The first being that there were initial feelings of shock, sadness, and disbelief in the immediate period after the suicide of a peer. Participants described losing a peer as an indescribable sense of loss and an overwhelming experience which took a while to process and did not seem real in the beginning. One participant stated, "It's hard to imagine seeing somebody in person so recently and then having to imagine that the person is no longer living and breathing." The loss of a peer due to suicide brought about many initial feelings for the participants. Three of them stated that they did not believe it initially because they were in shock and it took them a while to process the event. Two of the study participants described feeling overwhelmed and shaken up for days to come and one even described feeling like it was a "slap in the face" when they were told about the death by suicide of their peer.

The second theme that arose was that family and friends were the biggest factors in coping with the loss of a peer. Participants stated that losing a peer made their family a lot closer and that talking about the loss with friends made them realize that they weren't alone in their bereavement process. Family were said to be important especially in the beginning because they were able to understand how the participant was feeling at the time. Friends were also very important to the participants after the suicide of a peer because they were experiencing the same trauma. One participant stated, "Seeing that everyone else's feelings were kind of coinciding with mine made me feel better." Therefore, it is clear that friends and family are essential to adolescents after the suicide of their peer.

The third theme was that the death by suicide of a peer emphasized the importance of mental health as a whole. Upon reflecting on the loss of their peers, participants expressed that they became more aware of mental health and began to focus more on the mental well-being of themselves and their loved ones. One participant spoke on the impact of suicide on their mental health, by saying, “It made me realize that mental health is more real than what people tell you.” It was made clear that the death by suicide of a peer made the participants think about mental health differently than before. Two participants said that they tried to be nicer to people and check in with their friends and family more after they experienced peer suicide.

The last theme that emerged was that resources such as therapy, long-term follow-ups, and prevention efforts would have been beneficial after the suicide of a peer. Various resources were mentioned by the participants, such as education on suicide awareness and efforts to better assist in processing the loss, which would have been valuable in the immediate period after the suicide and in the years to come. One participant said that there “should have been more work about the impact that [the suicide] left on us. Not after day one, but on day two, and day three, and the week after, and two weeks after.” A common theme was that the participants weren’t provided with enough resources following the loss of their peers during adolescence.

Resources

Following the suggestions of the study participants, there were a variety of resources that were needed after the loss of a peer. Education on suicide awareness and prevention was brought up within the study as well as support and long-term follow-ups. A list of resources was compiled that could be used for future adolescents who experience the loss by suicide of a peer.

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) has a Healing Conversations program which gives individuals who have lost someone due to suicide the opportunity to speak

with experienced volunteers who are survivors of suicide loss themselves. Within the AFSP website, there is also a search tool to find a suicide bereavement support group. This resource would be valuable for adolescents who would like to talk about the loss and process it with someone who has already gone through the same experiences that they are struggling with.

The Jed Foundation is a website dedicated to assisting individuals with mental health concerns. There is an entire resource center with information on many things, including understanding and coping with grief and loss. Adolescents who have experienced the death by suicide of a peer can utilize the information on this website to learn about coping with the loss that they have experienced. It is important that adolescents are aware of healthy ways to manage and process their emotions so that they do not turn to alternative coping methods such as substance use.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has a website with numerous resources for anyone to use. There is a section called “Preventing Youth Suicide” with articles, information, and handouts on the topic. This could be beneficial for educators to give their adolescent students who experience the loss of someone due to suicide or even as a preventative measure for all of their students.

The Trevor Project offers counseling services via live chat, phone call, or text. The website also has mental health resources for individuals struggling with anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts, and substance abuse. This is a great website to use for adolescents who feel like they are struggling in coping with the loss of a peer and need someone to talk to or just want to learn about the resources available to them in their bereavement process.

Foster’s Voice is a website with information on how to recognize the warning signs of suicide and how to assist in a situation where someone is in a mental health crisis. They also

offer a monthly support group for those who have experienced the loss of someone due to suicide. Nobody knows when they will experience someone who is in a mental health crisis and it is important to know how to assist them so that they do not harm themselves.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website has a treatment services locator for those seeking assistance with substance abuse and mental health concerns. Treatment centers are great for those who are overwhelmed with the mental health effects that come with grieving the loss of someone close. It can be difficult to find a suitable facility; therefore, the SAMHSA website is somewhere to go to find the place best suited to individuals who are experiencing a decline in mental health.

The National Alliance on Mental Illness or NAMI also offers free educational programs, support groups, and mental health tools that anyone can use. Support groups are a great way for individuals to talk about their feeling surrounding grief and loss with others who understand what they are going through. Adolescents, in particular, can benefit from the support groups because they may find it difficult to relay their feelings to those who have never experienced the loss of a peer.

For those experiencing a mental health crisis, there are emergency hotlines available. The Jason Foundation has a Crisis Text Line that is available at all times for those who need it. There are trained crisis counselors who will answer the text and assist the individual through the crisis situation. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is also available at all times, where individuals can call to get assistance in a mental health crisis. These are great resources that adolescents can use if they are feeling hopeless about the loss of their peer.

Conclusion

The findings of the study indicate that the loss of a peer due to suicide in adolescence has an impact on individuals throughout adulthood. Even years later, the adult participants could recall how much of an effect it had on them at the time. The results emphasize the importance of providing resources and bereavement assistance for adolescents who experience the suicide of a peer. The loss of a peer during adolescence is an experience that can affect individuals in many ways, so it is imperative to know what those experiences were following the loss of a peer and what would be helpful in their bereavement process. The implications for nurses regarding this topic are abundant. As nurses will work with numerous patients who have experienced the loss of peers due to suicide and it is important to understand what those patients went through. Regardless of their specialty, nurses should be aware of the available mental health resources should their patients require them. Nurses can use the information that was given to them in this study about the initial feelings, coping mechanisms, and the impact peer suicide had on individuals and provide their patients with the appropriate resources to better address their mental health concerns following the loss of someone due to suicide.

Future Considerations

It would be beneficial for a future study to focus on the impact that peer suicide has on adolescents from the perspective of adolescents themselves. A study focusing on the differences in the impact of the loss of someone due to suicide compared to those who experienced the loss of a peer, to that of a friend or a family member would also be useful. The loss of someone due to suicide has a clear impact on individuals, but it would be helpful to know the different ways that it impacts those based on their relationship with the decedent.

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