Social Integration and Suicide

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A study of male health professionals 40-75 years of age found that the risk of suicide decreased as their levels of social integration increased and that “men who were socially well-integrated had a more than 2-fold reduced risk for suicide over 24 years of follow-up.” The authors suggest that their research provides evidence that social isolation, like mental illness, can contribute to an ongoing vulnerability for suicide that can be triggered by stressful life events.

Social integration was measured using items including marital status, the size of an individual’s social network and the frequency of contacts within that network, whether the man attended religious services, and the extent of his participation in other types of social groups. The sample was divided into four groups based on level of social integration. Most of the men in the sample were in the groups with the highest (41.5 percent) or second-highest (21.5 percent) levels of social integration.

The data analysis revealed that “the incidence of suicide decreased with increasing social integration.” The group with the highest average level of social integration had the lowest suicide rate; the group with the lowest average level of social integration had the highest suicide rate. The association between suicide and social integration also held true within each group. Men with higher levels of social integration were less at risk of suicide than men in their group with lower levels of social integration. The strongest protection against suicide was associated with being married, attending religious services, and the size of a man's social network.