Retrospective Measures of Suicide Attempts in Youth

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Asking young people about prior suicide attempts can provide valuable and reliable information for mental health professionals as well as suicide researchers, according to the authors of an article published in Journal of Adolescent Health. The research also revealed that approximately 40 percent of young people who reported attempting suicide were in elementary or middle school at the time of their first attempt, a finding that suggests that prevention activities should be implemented in both elementary and middle schools, as well as high school.

The young people in the sample were participating in a longitudinal study of the Raising Healthy Children positive youth development program. Data on depressive symptoms were collected annually from both control and treatment groups from the time they were in grades 3 or 4 until they reached grade 12. Retrospective information on suicide attempts was gathered upon completion of high school.

The students who reported having attempted suicide had higher scores on a measure of depressive symptoms during the year they made their first attempt than in other years. Their depression scores were also higher than those of their peers who did not report suicide attempts. The authors suggest that the correlation of the depression scores with the reported first suicide attempts suggests that the young people were accurately reporting their attempt histories.

The data analysis also revealed that young people who attempted suicide on more than one occasion tended to experience more ongoing chronic depression than the young people only reporting one attempt. The depressive symptoms of youth who made a single suicide attempt tended to be higher during the year in which the attempt occurred than in the other years of data collection. The authors point out although that “although depressive symptoms appear to be a good proxy for suicide attempts,” a history of depression is not the same as a history of either suicidal ideation or attempts.


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