Coping Strategies and Youth

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Researchers from the Annenberg Public Policy Center identified three coping skills as being especially effective at preventing young people from developing suicidal ideation. These skills are (1) problem-solving, (2) emotional regulation, and (3) support seeking. They propose that universal training in coping skills should be used in schools to prevent the onset of suicidal thoughts among young people. They point out that the most popular approach to suicide prevention used in schools, gatekeeping - while important - focuses on identifying students with risk factors like depression and suicidal ideation, but does not protect students from developing these risk factors.

The authors of this study investigated the relationship of natural coping strategies used by young people 14-23 years of age and the onset of suicidal thoughts over a 1-year period. Multivariate analysis of data from a telephone survey revealed that both problem solving and emotional regulation were associated with reductions in future depression and stress, as well as suicidal ideation associated with those two risk factors. Support seeking was found to be directly associated with protection against developing suicidal ideation - that is, children who used social support as a coping mechanism were less likely to develop suicidal ideation than those who did not, although social support did not affect either stress or depression.

Acceptance, a coping strategy in which young people “just take things as they are” was associated with an increase in emotional regulation, which decreased the risk of suicidal ideation, but was also associated with a direct increase in suicidal ideation. To explain this mixed effect, the authors suggest that acceptance may be effective for stressors that cannot be controlled but ineffective on stressors that can be changed (like interpersonal conflicts), although the survey data did not allow them to test this theory. A fourth coping strategy, distraction, in which youth “think about happy things” to take their minds off their problems did not have any significant effect. Although the coping strategies were similarly effective for both sexes, the data revealed that girls tend to rely more on social support, while boys tend to use emotional regulation.


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