Suicide Exposure: Perceptions of Impact and Closeness

March 30, 2018
News Type:  Weekly Spark,  Weekly Spark Research

People exposed to suicide are at greater risk for mental health symptoms if they perceive a high level of closeness with the deceased and that the suicide had a large and lasting impact on their lives.

Using a sample of 807 suicide-exposed individuals in Kentucky, researchers examined the effects of perceived closeness with the deceased and perceived impact of the death on the following mental health outcomes: (1) depression and anxiety symptoms over the past two weeks, (2) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to the suicide, (3) prolonged grief, and (4) current suicidal ideation. Perceived closeness was measured on a scale ranging from “not close” to “very close” to the decedent. Perceived impact was measured on a scale ranging from “the death had little effect on my life” to “the death had a significant or devastating effect on me that I still feel.”

Even after adjusting for demographic and contextual variables—such as age, sex, and time since the suicide loss—perceived closeness and perceived impact increased the odds of depression, anxiety, PTSD, and prolonged grief. These findings could help target postvention resources to those at greatest risk for poor mental health outcomes following suicide exposure.
