Coping, Social Support, and Suicide Attempts among Homeless Adolescents

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Homeless youth who perceive higher levels of social support, including the availability of tangible assistance, may be at decreased risk for suicide attempts.

Researchers surveyed 76 homeless adolescents ages 12 to 19, who spent at least one night in one of eight Canadian shelters. Adolescents were asked about past-year suicide attempts, coping style, and perceptions of social support. Coping style was classified into one of three categories: (1) productive, that is, working through a problem while remaining socially connected and physically fit; (2) nonproductive, or engaging in behaviors to avoid the problem; and (3) referencing others, or seeking out others to help deal with the problem. Perceived social support was measured through the social provisions scale, which asks about perceived guidance, reliable alliance (i.e., the belief that others can be counted on for tangible assistance), reassurance of worth, opportunity for nurturance, attachment, and social integration.

Adolescents at highest risk of a past-year suicide attempt had used a nonproductive coping style more frequently and had lower levels of perceived social support. After controlling for gender, reliable alliance emerged as a protective factor against adolescents’ suicide attempts. Tension reduction, specifically the use of alcohol or drugs as a coping mechanism, emerged as a risk factor.

Agencies working with homeless youth should help connect them with appropriate sources of social support and tangible assistance, and continue to prioritize substance abuse prevention, to help decrease suicide risk.