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The Internet and Suicide: A Deadly Combination?

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Introduction

The internet and suicidal behavior are invariably intertwined. Excessive internet use is associated with depression, and researchers have found a positive association between number of hours on the internet and suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. (Lester, 2009) However, what remains to be asked is whether the internet has a positive or negative effect on its suicidal users. While many users may find the internet a place of aid and healing through supportive communities and suicide prevention resources available online, others seek solace in pro-suicide websites that encourage self-harm. This paper will attempt to separate and individually evaluate each of these separately as to determine whether the internet is more harmful or helpful to suicidal individuals.

The Benefits of Suicide Prevention via Internet

Due to the stigma associated with suicide and mental health issues associated with suicide, such as depression, schizophrenia, or anxiety disorders, many people are reluctant to get help in a way that would reveal their identity. The anonymity of the internet is the perfect way for these people to openly discuss their problems without fear of being judged. Therefore, the internet is a valuable tool in preventing suicide in this group. Counselors can help increase awareness and help-seeking behaviors, such as going to a therapist, while decreasing stigmatization and destructive behaviors, such as suicide or self-harm. (Durkee, Hadlaczky,

Westerlund, Carli, 2011) Many organizations are taking advantage of this to use the internet as one of the many weapons in their suicide-prevention arsenal.

The first suicide prevention hotline, dubbed the Samaritans, was created in 1953 by a vicar named Chad Varah in hopes of preventing suicides in the UK. (“Samaritans History”, 2011) Now, the Samaritans, along with many other hotlines and groups around the world, use the internet as a resource to get in touch with at-risk suicidal youth. In addition to phones, many groups utilize chat rooms and e-mail to speak to their clients. While telephones do afford some anonymity, the internet is almost entirely anonymous. Some adolescents still living with their parents may find this useful, as parents are more likely to monitor phone than internet usage. The internet also gives the client more control over the entire counseling process, which makes users feel safer. (Lester, 2009) In addition, when using an e-mail system, such as the Samaritans use, counselors are able to take more time in their replies and consult peers and supervisors before sending a reply.

Disadvantages of Suicide Prevention over the Internet

However, while the internet is anonymous, it is also impersonal. Lester (2009) notes,

“In contrast to counseling by e-mail, telephone counseling is immediate, feedback is obtained from the client quickly, and there is opportunity to correct mistakes. Counselors can hear the client’s voice and realize if they have touched an area which is sensitive for

the client. There are many cues, such as the tone of voice, silence, and crying, and these cues can guide counselor responses. ... The language used in e-mail counseling is another area in which the counselor can have difficulties. In telephone counseling, it is easier to assess the nuances of meaning by the tone of the voice. E-mail requires simpler more straightforward language in order to avoid any confusion.”

This makes the counselors much more stressed, as they may not have any clues to the mental state of their client. In addition, while telephoning is more subtle and caring, e-mails can seem straightforward, shocking, and detached. (Lester, 2009)

Many websites, in addition to crisis hotlines, also provide information on where to get help locally, signs of suicide in friends, and general awareness of mental illness and depression. While this may seem beneficial, Szumilas and Kutcher (2009) found that more than one half of statements on popular Canadian suicide-help websites were unsubstantiated by any evidence. Lester (2009) also indicates that, while trying to be helpful, “there is great disparity on the information presented and, furthermore, there is little validity for many of the warning signs listed [on such websites].” It is distressing that such misinformation exists on sites that are supposed to be helpful to vulnerable, suicidal youth. Szumilas et al. (2009) state, “fundamental to addressing issues pertaining to youth suicide is the availability of high-quality, evidence-based information that is readily accessible to the public, health providers, and policy-makers.”

Online Support Groups

Since the 1980s, people have been using support groups to overcome alcoholism, depression, sexual assault, and other difficult obstacles. More recently, online support groups have developed, allowing hundreds or even thousands of users to communicate together. (Frey, 2003) Some suicidal youth, rather than consulting professionals or a non-profit group such as the Samaritans, join online support groups where other self-harming, depressed, and/or suicidal people can discuss and try and overcome their illnesses. In asynchronous groups such as these, Lester (2009) found that high-risk suicidal communications were much more likely to occur. With such disclosure, online message boards create a supposedly positive environment where people who are going through similar situations can communicate with and help each other. These message boards vary wildly in their rules and members. In some, encouragement or announcement of suicide is forbidden. Others provide helpful links and information on how to get help locally. In still others, which will be discussed later, suicide is glorified. (Becker, Schmidt, 2005)

A study of a self-harm messaged board by Rodham, Gavin, and Miles (2007) found that “the kind of support which was offered to those posting messages did not explicitly address the problem behaviors articulated by the message posters. Instead, the responses appeared to minimize the seriousness of and/or normalize the behaviors described.” While this certainly does reduce stigmatization of a condition and appear helpful, by normalizing self-harming and potentially suicidal behaviors, it validates them as a way of coping with life that is certainly not

helpful to users. Still, many users consider the message boards an important source of support in their daily lives. (Rodham et al., 2007)

Pro-Suicide Websites and Communities

Rather than giving resources and helping their users to heal, some websites actually encourage self-harm and suicide. These websites are not even underground or hidden. Looking at the first ten results at a number of search engines, researchers found that 30% of the content of these web pages either encouraged or at least did not reject suicide as a viable option. 11% were quite obviously pro-suicide. Youth are especially vulnerable to pro-suicide websites. While in the general population, suicide-related web searches coincided with a drop in suicide rates (presumably due to people finding help), in youth 15-25 years old, suicide-related web searches were positively correlated with self-harming and suicidal behavior. (Durkee et al., 2011)

These websites encourage suicide as an act of rebellion against society and are a useful means of coping with life. People who succeed are celebrated or treated as heroes. The sites detail methods of how to kill one's self. Some users even create suicide pacts, in which they will gather and all commit suicide together. Such pacts resulted in 91 deaths in Japan in 2005 alone. (Lester, 2009) To already vulnerable youth who are often isolated due to the depression that often precludes suicide, these communities can be seen as a blessing. However, they encourage destructive behavior and pressure people into killing themselves. (Durkee et al., 2011)

Prevention of Pro-Suicide Websites

Pro-suicide websites are often harmful to their users, some of which may just be looking for help, rather than encouragement to kill themselves. However, preventing these websites is much easier said than done. Due to free-speech laws in many countries, illegalizing these sites proves nearly impossible. In addition, while aiding and abetting suicide is illegal, it is difficult to connect a single person to the suicide of a user. With these websites, it is often unclear who the direct cause of the suicide is. It is often an entire community encouraging suicide and a sub-culture of suicide glorifiers. In addition, it is possible that the person would have killed themselves anyways, without the website's influence. This makes it very difficult to arrest members of these communities. In addition, any attempts to block suicide-positive sites may also inadvertently block websites meaning to help people struggling with suicide and providing useful resources. The United States, Great Britain, and New Zealand all have unsuccessfully attempted to pass laws to restrict these sites, but all have been overturned due to free-speech laws in their constitutions. However, Australia successfully passed a law in 2004 that bans internet activity that encourages suicide or provides instructions on how to do so. Most countries rely on internet service providers to block access to these websites, but these are usually unsuccessful. (Mishara, Weisstub, 2007) In addition, blocking access to these pro-suicide websites only drives them deeper underground. Rather than banning these sites, researchers suggest making resources

and aid more visible, as well as qualified psychiatric help being encouraged by all websites.
(Becker et al., 2005)

Conclusion

The internet can be both a great benefit and a great harm to suicidal, depressed, or self-harming youths. While many resources are available online, none of these can replace the help of a therapist and medication in real life. In addition, whether or not a person is helped by the internet relies on which websites and resources they choose to utilize. While some, such as the Samaritans, choose to help these adolescents, other pro-suicide sites provide a troublesome ethical and legal dilemma for governments. By banning them, they could potentially save lives, but in doing so, they limit free speech. Either way, the internet is a largely untapped and viable resource for education and prevention of suicide.

Annotated Bibliography

Becker K., & Schmidt M. (2005). When Kids Seek Help On-Line: Internet Chat Rooms and Suicide. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 13(4), 229-230. Retrieved February 26, 2012, from Health Module. (Document ID: 884434871).

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=884434871&sid=2&Fmt=4&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

This article was written by two doctors, one of which is in the department of child and adolescent psychiatry and psychotherapy in the Central Institute of Mental Health in Mannheim, Germany. It was originally published in the *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. It contains useful information about the differing qualities of suicide chat rooms and resources.

Durkee, T., Hadlaczky, G., Westerlund, M., & Carli, V.. (2011). Internet Pathways in Suicidality: A Review of the Evidence. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 8(10), 3938-3952. Retrieved February 26, 2012, from ProQuest Science Journals. (Document ID: 2521943421).

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=2521943421&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

This article was written by authors from the National Swedish Prevention of Suicide and Mental Ill-Health, the Department of Public Health Sciences in Sweden, and the Department of

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Journalism, Media, and Communication in Sweden. It compiles information about the various paths suicidal people can take while looking for resources on the internet.

Frey, Lawrence R.. Group communication in context: studies in bona fide groups. 2nd ed.
Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum, 2003. Print.

The essay in the book I used is written by three doctors, one of which is in the Veteran Affairs for Primary Health Care Research. The editor/compiler is a professor in the department of communication in the University of Colorado at Boulder. It discusses the various communication styles used in multiple support groups, including online depression support groups.

Lester, D. (2009). The Use of the Internet for Counseling the Suicidal Individual: Possibilities and Drawbacks. *Omega*, 58(3), 233. Retrieved February 27, 2012, from Psychology Module. (Document ID: 1630786931).

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1630786931&sid=1&Fmt=2&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

David Lester has worldwide recognition as a leading authority on suicide. He is a recipient of the Dublin Award for Outstanding Lifetime Achievement from the American Association of Suicidology, and is also the executive director at the Center for the Study of Suicide. This article was immensely helpful and analyzed how the internet both helps and hurts suicidal people, and also provided specific case studies.

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Mishara B., Weisstub, D. (2007). Ethical, Legal, and Practical Issues in the Control and Regulation of Suicide Promotion and Assistance over the Internet. *Suicide & Life - Threatening Behavior*, 37(1), 58-65. Retrieved February 26, 2012, from Proquest. (Document ID: 1247259181)

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1247259181&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Mishara is the Director for the Centre for Research and Intervention on Suicide and Euthanasia, and Weisstub is Professor of Legal Psychiatry and Biomedical Ethics at the University of Montreal, Canada. This article just talked about the ethical, practical, and legal issues with banning suicide-positive websites.

Rodham K., Gavin J., & Miles M. (2007). I Hear, I Listen and I Care: A Qualitative Investigation into the Function of a Self-Harm Message Board. *Suicide & Life - Threatening Behavior*, 37(4), 422-30. Retrieved February 26, 2012, from Health Module. (Document ID: 1334726031).

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1334726031&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Rodham is a lecturer in Health Psychology, Gavin is a lecturer in Communication and Social Psychology. Miles is a learning support assistant at a primary school. This article is an in-depth case study of a self-harm message board, and looks at the possible ethical issues surrounding it, as well as the helpfulness of the message board to its users.

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"Samaritans History." Samaritans Home Page. Samaritans, 2011 Web. 27 Feb. 2012.

<http://www.samaritans.org/about_samaritans/governance_and_history/samaritans_history.aspx>.

This is on the official Samaritans website and details their history.

Sher, L., and Vilens, A. *Internet and suicide*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2009. Print.

Leo Sher is an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Columbia University and a Research Psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute. In addition, Vilens is an information technology expert. This book details the complicated relationship between the internet and suicide as a double-edged sword.

Szumilas, M., & Kutcher, S.. (2009). Teen Suicide Information on the Internet: A Systematic Analysis of Quality. *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54(9), 596-604. Retrieved February 26, 2012, from Health Module. (Document ID: 1882474391).

<http://mutex.gmu.edu:2048/login?url=http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1882474391&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=31810&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

This was published by the Canadian Psychiatric Association and is an analysis of the information provided on Suicide Prevention websites, and whether such information provided on these sites is backed up by evidence.

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