

Family - protective factor to prevent suicidal behavior in adolescents

¹Ioana R. Rusu, ¹Doina Cosman, ¹Bogdan Nemes

¹ Department of Clinical Psychology, “Iuliu Hațieganu” University of Medicine and Pharmacy Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania.

Abstract. Objective: The purpose of our research was to establish a possible correlation between suicide risk in adolescents and a series of intra-familial protective factors such as family harmony, intact families, increased family involvement in child education, empathy, ability to express emotions. Materials and Methods The study comprised the 1143 pupils, aged between 14 and 16 years from Cluj and Maramures counties, that participated in the SEYLE baseline evaluation. Results: Adolescents who have no problems with parents ($p < 0.001$), being understood by them ($p < 0.001$) and having the belief that family is very important to them ($p < 0.001$), are protected from the risk of committing suicide. At the same time, parents' ability to listen children opinion ($p < 0.001$) and help them take important decisions ($p < 0.001$), the time spent discussing with teens the problems they're going through ($p < 0.001$), and the fact that parents know what they do in their spare time ($p = 0.003$) shows protective factors of suicidal behavior with a statistically significant value in this study. Conclusion: The family is a psychosocial system with a major impact on adolescents' personality formation. The attitude towards children, the parents availability to important moments for teens, the ability to be both subjective and objective towards their children initiatives, are factors of protection against adolescents' suicidal behavior.

Key Words: protective factors, family, suicidal risk, teenagers.

Copyright: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Corresponding Author: I. R. Rusu, tulai.ioana123@yahoo.com

Introduction

Family environment has great importance for maintaining the integrity of child psychology, since the most important functions of the family are: the maintenance of biological and cultural continuity (the transmission of cultural heritage in the process of socialization), the transmission of social position, the of emotional and intimacy needs conveying a sense of safety and maintenance of personality, social integration of its members through education and socialization processes. Furthermore, family resists to pressure to both internal and external demands through the commitment and solidarity of partners and parents, and through emotional cohesion (Voinea 1996).

Family factors involved in teens' appropriate emotional development contain four components: the relationship between parent and adolescent (presence of parents in children's lives, work sharing, participation in joint activities, closeness), behavior norms and rules (school acknowledgement, sexual behavior), parental model (attempted suicide in the family) and family features (access to firearms and harmful substances) (Resnik *et al* 1997). On the other hand, family breakdown through divorce or loss of one parent (death or leaving the family) might put the child in a time of despair and search for psychological comfort. Therefore child suicide cannot be separated from the characteristics of the family of origin (Cosman 2006).

Aim

The present study is aimed to investigate whether familial factors can provide protections against suicidal behavior in adolescents.

Material and Method

The study group comprised 1143 ninth grade adolescents (aged 14 to 16 years) attending 16 theoretical schools – 11 from Cluj county and 5 from Maramures county. About 34,6% of subjects were males.

Data was collected through the baseline evaluation of the SEYLE European project founded by the European Commission through the 7th Framework Program. The study protocol has been published elsewhere (Wasserman *et al* 2010).

Data on suicidal behavior was collected through the Paykel Suicide Scale. Data on adolescents' families was collected through questions on whether parents understood their issues and concerns, know what they do in their spare time, help them take important decisions, talk to their children about things that are happening, pay attention to their opinions, divorce between parents and importance of family in their education.

Statistical analysis was performed using the Statistical Pack for Social Sciences, SPSS version 15.0. Differences in the groups was assessed using χ^2 test, and for the dicotomical variables odds ratios and confidence intervals were calculated.

Results

About 2.17% of students reported a suicide attempt in the last six months.

Adolescents who said that parents have always understood (or most of the time) their problems and worries have a significantly lower risk for suicide attempt (OR = 0.367, 95% CI = [0.172; 0.786], $p < 0.001$ – Fisher exact test) than those who have never been understood by their parents or guardians (see Figure 1).

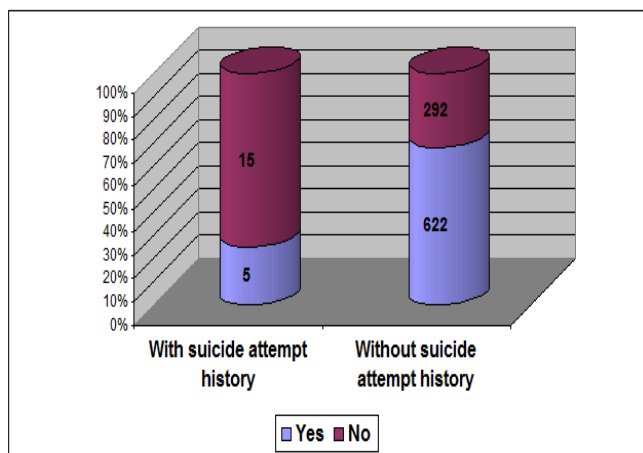


Figure 1. Parents understand their children

Adolescents whose parents know most of the time what they do, pose a risk to commit suicide significantly lower than those whose parents never or rarely knew what their children do (OR = 0.589, 95% CI = [0.362, 0.957], p = 0.003 – Fisher exact test) (see Figure 2).

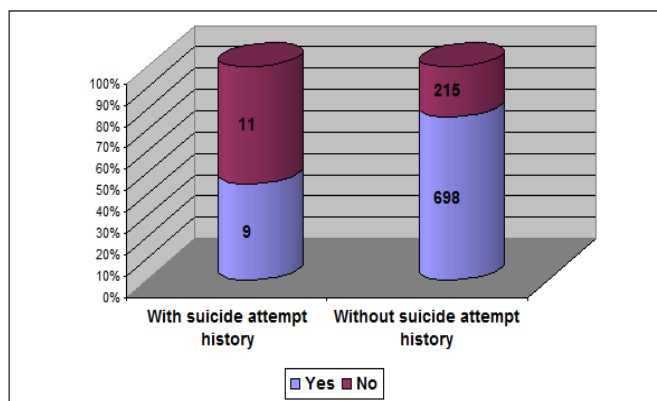


Figure 2. Parents know what children do in their spare time

About 98.82% of students with no attempt to suicide said that family is very important (p<0.001) for them (see Figure 3).

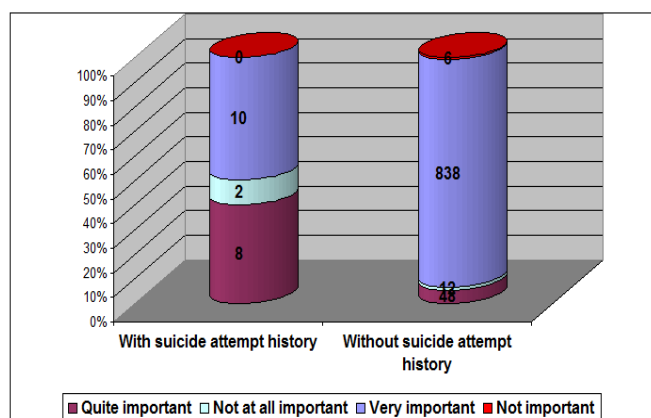


Figure 3. Importance of family in adolescent life

Adolescents from families in which divorce did not occur show a significant lower risk of suicide attempts (OR = 0.856, 95% CI = [0.712, 0.929] – p<0.001 – Fisher exact test) as compared to families with divorced parents (see Figure 4).

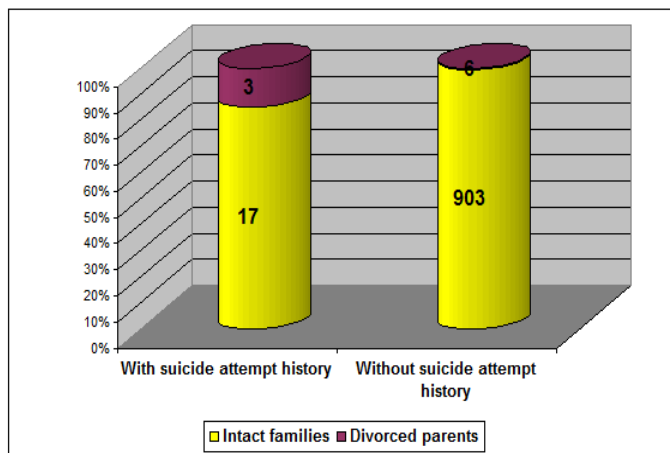


Figure 4. Families in which divorce did not occur vs families with divorced parents

Table 1. The other intra-familial factors for suicidal behavior to protect adolescents

	Subjects without suicidal attempt		Subjects with suicidal attempt		Results	
	N	%	N	%	χ ²	P
Parents talk to their children about things that are happening	581	98.81	7	1.19	38.221	<0.001
Parents pay attention to their children opinions	643	98.78	8	1.22	33.89	<0.001
Parents help them take important decisions	551	98.92	6	1.08	44.994	<0.001
Students who have no problems with parents	772	99.35	5	0.65	51.358	<0.001

Having parents who always help adolescents make important decisions, take the time to talk to them about things that are happening, come see them when they have extracurricular activities, are aware of their opinion or what they say, are statistically significant protective factors against suicide attempts (see Tabela I). Favorable climate in the family, no problem with parents, also represent a protective factor against suicide attempts of adolescents reporting such situations, as compared to those who say that there are disagreements and misunderstandings in their families (RR = 0.294, 95% CI = [0.138, 0.629], p<0.001 – Fisher exact test).

Discussion

Our results show a number of important familial protective factors against adolescent suicide: no problems with parents; having parents that understand their issues and concerns, know what they do in their spare time, help them take important decisions,

talk to them about things that are happening and pay attention to their opinions.

Other studies had similar results. A study by Resnick and colleagues (Resnick *et al* 1997), which included a total of 12,118 students indicated that close contact between family members (i.e. the presence of parents during the important moments of the day and joint activities) has a significant influence on adolescent behavior, protecting them from harm (including self harm behavior). Another study by Blum, Forrester and colleagues, which included a total of 16,000 students revealed that family cohesion is a protective factor against suicide attempts in all age range (Blum *et al* 2003). Furthermore, longitudinal and cross-sectional studies on adolescents reveal that subjects who perceive family life in terms of commitment, shared interests and emotional support were between 3.5 to 5.5 times less likely to develop suicidal behavior compared with subjects with low levels of family cohesion and similar degree of depression and stress (Gould *et al* 2003). Similarly, our results show that parents who understand the issues and concerns of adolescents, being emotionally involved in their resolution, and support and encourage their children at decisive moments in life, provide a protective environment against the suicidal risk of adolescents. Adolescents who believe that parents are interested in their concerns most of the time or always show low risk to commit suicide. Also, of those who say that parents help in making important decisions, only 1.08% are at risk of suicide.

The study of Resnick and collaborators also showed a protective effect of high school expectations (Resnick *et al* 1997). Following the same line, in our study, adolescents who reported that their parents know what they do in their spare time are protected from suicide.

Complementary to the study of protective factors is the analysis of risk factors, which in many cases are their mirror pair. Spirito and colleagues observed that the problems and family conflicts are more common in the history of adolescents who had attempted suicide (Spirito 2006). Lewinsohn and colleagues, in a study in Oregon, noted that adolescents who had previous suicide attempts showed a more intense conflict than those without attempt (Lewinsohn *et al* 1996). Open conflicts (between spouses or between child and parent) seem to differentiate adolescents with suicidal attempts to control group (Hollenbeck *et al* 2003). Tishler and his team have reported similar conclusions, finding a rate of 52% of adolescents with suicidal attempt that stated that have problems with parents. Most times they feel rejected by one or both parents (Tishler *et al* 1981). Conversely, our results show that one of the factors that protect adolescents from suicide risk is the lack of problems with their parents.

In our study, another important protective factor against adolescent suicidal behavior were families in which divorce did not occur. Separation of parents is a risk factor intensively studied in the literature, our results confirming literature data that children with divorced parents are 22.7 times more likely to commit suicide (Adams *et al* 1994; Gould *et al* 1994).

Conclusions

Active involvement of parents in the lives of adolescents (parents who help them to take important decisions, are interested in their education, know what they do in their spare time), are protective factors against suicide attempts in adolescents.

Furthermore, harmonious relationships between parents and adolescents, the ability to communicate with their children and understanding their issues and concerns are also important protective factors against suicide attempts in adolescents.

References

- Adams, D. M., Overholser M. A., Lehnert K. L., 1994. Perceived Family Functioning and Adolescent Suicidal Behavior. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 33:498-507.
- Blum, R., Halcon, L., Beuhring, T., et al, 2003. Adolescent Health in the Caribbean : Risk and Protective Factors. *Am J Public Health* 93:456-460.
- Cosman, D., 2006. Compendiu de suicidologie. Casa Cărții de Știință.
- Gould, M. S., Fisher, P., Parides, M., Flory, M., Shaffer, D., 1996. Psychosocial risk factors of child and adolescent completed suicide. *Arch Gen Psychiatry* 53:1155-1162.
- Gould, M., Greenberg, T., Velting, D. M., Shaffer, D., 2003. Youth Suicide Risk and Preventive Interventions: A Review of the Past 10 Years. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry* 42:386-405.
- Hollenbeck, J., Dyl, J., Spirito, D. A., 2003. Social Factors: Family Functioning In: Spirito, D. A., Overholser, J. C. Evaluating and treating adolescent suicide attempters: from research to practice. pp. 170-184, Elsevier Science, San Diego.
- Lewinsohn, P. M., Rohde, P., Suley, J. R., 1996. Adolescent Suicidal Ideation and Attempts: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Clinical Implication. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 3(1):25-46.
- Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., et al, 1997. Protecting Adolescents From Harm. *JAMA* 278:823-832.
- Spirito, A., 2006 Attempted and Completed Suicide in Adolescence. *Annu Rev Clin Psychol* 2:237-266.
- Tishler, C. L., McKenny, P. C., Morgan, K. C., 1981. Adolescent suicide attempts: some significant factors. *Suicide Life Threat Behav* 11(2):86-92.
- Voinea, M., 1996. Psihosociologia familiei. Editura Universității, București.
- Wasserman, D., Carli, V., Apter, A., et al, 2010. Saving and Empowering Young Lives in Europe (SEYLE): a randomized controlled trial. *BMC Public Health* 10:192.

Authors

- Ioana R. Rusu, Clinical Psychology and Mental Health Department, "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 43rd Victor Babeș Street, 400012, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania, EU, email: tulai.ioana123@yahoo.com.
- Doina Cosman, Clinical Psychology and Mental Health Department, "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 43rd Victor Babeș Street, 400012, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania, EU, email: dcosman@umfcluj.ro.
- Bogdan Nemeș, Clinical Psychology and Mental Health Department, "Iuliu Hațieganu" University of Medicine and Pharmacy, 43rd Victor Babeș Street, 400012, Cluj-Napoca, Cluj, Romania, EU, email: nemes.bogdan@umfcluj.ro.

Citation	Rusu, I. R., Cosman, D., Nemeş, B., 2012. Family - protective factor to prevent suicidal behavior in adolescents. HVM Bioflux 4(3):103-106.
Editor	Ştefan C. Vesa
Received	17 February 2012
Accepted	28 November 2012
Published Online	2 December 2012
Funding	None reported
Conflicts/ Competing Interests	None reported