

Examining the relationship between suicide bereavement and self-harm among adolescents in Scotland

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Introduction: Suicidal and self-harming behaviours (SSHBs) are a leading cause of death in young people and are a major public health concern worldwide. Various studies suggest that exposure to suicide may increase risk of engagement in SSHBs. Yet, little is known about this experience of “suicide survivorship” in adolescents. Given that self-harm is a significant predictor of completed suicide, there is an urgent need for research identifying potential risk factors for self-harm in this population.

Aim: The primary aims of this investigation are to: (1) assess the incidence of bereavement by suicide and other causes among Scottish adolescents, and (2) employ a theoretical framework to help conceptualise why experiences of losing a loved one to suicide may lead to greater risk of SSHBs.

Methods: Pupils 12-17 years of age in secondary schools have been invited to take part in a self-report questionnaire at two time points (6 months apart), assessing their experiences with bereavement and lifetime engagement in SSHBs. Data relating to other aspects of this relationship, such as feelings of defeat, entrapment, prolonged grief reactions, stigmatising beliefs about suicide, and social support, will also be measured.

Results: Recruitment is still underway (aiming for n=500), and therefore, only findings from baseline assessments will be presented. Logistic regressions will be used to assess the relationship between baseline measures and engagement in SSHBs. It is expected that exposure to suicide will confer a greater risk of self-harm or suicidal ideation and behaviours than exposure to other types of deaths, and this relationship will be influenced by circumstances surrounding the death and other post-loss factors.

Conclusion: Despite the growing interest in understanding the impact of suicide, there is a need to better understand the experiences of young bereaved individuals, helping to inform future postvention strategies, suicide intervention and prevention efforts, and theoretical conceptualisations of self-harm.

Keywords: Self-harm; suicide; bereavement experiences; postvention

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