

A REVIEW OF KNOWLEDGE AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS SUICIDE AMONG STUDENTS

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TINJAUAN PENGETAHUAN DAN SIKAP TERHADAP BUNUH DIRI DALAM KALANGAN PELAJAR

ABSTRAK:

Bunuh diri adalah isu kesihatan awam yang kritikal dan didefinisikan sebagai kematian yang disengajakan dengan niat untuk mati. Ia merupakan akibat paling serius daripada gangguan kesihatan mental, termasuk kemurungan utama. Kerumitan bunuh diri melibatkan pelbagai faktor sosial, psikologi, dan fizikal, dengan risiko yang lebih tinggi dikaitkan dengan penyalahgunaan bahan, perasaan kesunyian, dan tanggapan bahawa diri sendiri menjadi beban. Di peringkat global, bunuh diri adalah penyebab kematian yang signifikan, terutamanya dalam kalangan golongan muda, dengan lebih daripada 800,000 kematian setiap tahun. Walaupun kerap berlaku, memahami dan meramalkan tingkah laku bunuh diri masih mencabar. Kajian ini mengkaji prevalens, pengetahuan, dan sikap terhadap bunuh diri, dengan memberi tumpuan kepada hubungannya dengan faktor sosio-demografi serta hubungan antara pengetahuan dan sikap terhadap bunuh diri dalam kalangan pelajar. Dapatan daripada kajian-kajian terdahulu menunjukkan bahawa walaupun pengetahuan tentang bunuh diri berbeza-beza, sikap sering dipengaruhi oleh budaya dan sosial, dengan kesan ketara pada pembolehubah sosio-demografi seperti jantina dan pendidikan ibu bapa. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyumbang kepada pemahaman tentang bunuh diri dengan matlamat untuk memperbaiki strategi pencegahan.

Kata kunci: Bunuh diri, isu kesihatan awam, pengetahuan dan sikap.

ABSTRACT:

Suicide is a critical public health issue defined as a self-inflicted death with the intent to die. It represents the most severe consequence of mental health disorders, including major depression. The complexity of suicide involves a range of social, psychological, and physical factors, with increased risks associated with substance abuse, feelings of isolation, and a perception of being a burden. Globally, suicide is a significant cause of death, especially among young adults, with over 800,000 deaths annually. Despite its prevalence, understanding and predicting suicidal behaviour remains challenging. This article reviews the prevalence, knowledge and attitudes toward suicide, focusing on their relationship with socio-demographic factors among students and the correlation between knowledge and attitudes toward suicide among students. Findings from previous studies indicate that while knowledge of suicide varies, attitudes are often shaped by cultural and social influences, with a notable impact on socio-demographic variables such as gender and parental education. This study aims to contribute to the understanding of suicide with the aim of improving prevention strategies.

Keywords: *Suicide, public health issue, knowledge and attitudes.*

Introduction:

Suicide is a death caused by dangerous behaviour toward oneself with the purpose of bringing about one's own death. This type of death takes place when a person engages in fatal behaviours purposely to take her or his life. As defined by the American Psychological Association (2019), suicide is the taking of one's life, generally a response to depression or other mental health disorders. An associated term is "suicide attempt", which refers to performing behaviour likely (e.g. intentionally) to cause injury or death, but not resulting in a harmful outcome. Suicidal ideation is an essential feature of suicide, thoughts or contemplation about suicide. This falls under two types, active and passive suicidal ideation. Active suicidal ideation means that the person is thinking about, contemplating or planning suicide and intends to act on these thoughts, likely leading to an attempt. In contrast, passive suicidal ideation involves thoughts of death or a wish to be dead in the absence of any specific plans or intentions to act (Harmer et al., 2024).

Suicide varies from being simply a personal problem to a very alarming mental health crisis in present-day society. On the one hand, it is often defined as self-annihilation by those who might be fully aware of what they are doing but cannot cope with the mental health problems they are facing. Some of the most common causes of depression are major depressive episodes, which are times when depression is very intense. The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) has given suicide the status of a critical issue due to its underestimated potential to cause death, which makes it a top public health priority (World Health Organization, 2019). The causes of suicide are numerous and include social, psychological, and physical dimensions. As an example, a study has shown that the misuse of alcohol and drugs has the effect of increasing the risk of suicidal thoughts many times over; thus, consequently, a significant number of suicide attempts will be carried out.

Globally, the prevalence of suicide has seen a troubling increase, with rates rising by 60% over the past 45 years. Suicide is now the third leading cause of death worldwide, with only two other causes surpassing it. The groups most affected are those aged 15 to 44 years; thus, it affects both males and females. The total number of suicides is projected to reach 1.5 million by 2020 according to the World Health Organization. The mortality rate resulting from suicide was estimated at 10.7 deaths per 100,000 individuals in 2015, meaning that there was almost one suicide a minute. In the United States, the suicide rate for 2017 was approximately 14.0 per 100,000 individuals. Historically, men have shown higher suicidal behaviours than women, and mental disorders, such as depression and substance abuse, are related to over 90% of suicide cases (World Health Organization, 2019).

Recent statistics indicate that youth suicide is on the rise, and university students are experiencing a worrying and swift increase. However, there is an urgent public health concern that requires immediate action. According to Eskin et al. (2016), 47.5% of university students in Botswana have reported experiencing suicidal tendencies or behaviour. In South Africa, a study conducted revealed that 32.3% of medical students had comparable problems (Niekerk et al., 2012). These figures demonstrate a serious issue with mental health among students in these areas.

Malaysia, of course, has its own set of concerns. A major public health issue was the 5.5 per 100,000 people who took their own lives in the country. In addition, 6.2% of teenagers experience suicidal ideation, and the figures highlight a significant gender gap. Additionally, women are more likely than men to have suicidal tendencies (Statista Research Department, 2016.)

With the prevalence of worrying statistics and trends on suicide, this review will investigate students' understandings and attitudes towards suicide by examining their socio-demographic factors. Effective prevention strategies and interventions can be facilitated by identifying the gaps in knowledge and attitudes among students.

Knowledge and Attitude Regarding Suicide

Arya (2015) conducted a thorough study that shows significantly negative associations between students' knowledge about suicide and their attitudes towards it among 15–18 year olds. According to the study, students had low knowledge scores ($M = 10.2$) regarding suicide. They had scores that exhibited a relatively high M attitude ($M = 25.9$), suggesting their mental attitude may be more neutral or less biased in relation to suicide than other individuals. The inconsistency highlights a significant gap: even though students may seem more accepting or open to new ideas, their understanding of suicide is still limited. This discrepancy indicates that educational efforts must focus on enhancing suicide knowledge in this age group to guarantee that accurate and comprehensive information is available for all attitudes.

In comparison to their first and second years, Yang et al. (2015) examined the differences in attitudes towards and knowledge of suicide among undergraduate students in their third and fourth years. The study found that students who completed their undergraduate education in the late stages of their freshman year had better knowledge and attitudes towards suicide than their younger peers. This improvement was due to increased exposure to educational material about suicide as students progressed through their academic studies. The outcomes reinforce the notion that advancements in schooling can result in a deeper comprehension of suicide-related matters, potentially through more targeted educational initiatives. Despite this, the research also highlighted that there are still significant gaps in knowledge at earlier stages of education, necessitating early and ongoing educational efforts to address these gaps.

The prevalence of suicidal ideation among university and college students was further investigated by Dachew et al. (2018), who identified mental distress and a history of family mental illness as significant factors. These studies were thorough. These factors were found to be the primary reasons for students' suicidal tendencies, as stated in the study. This recognition of the crucial need for targeted mental health measures is reflected in this. The effectiveness of interventions targeting mental health challenges and providing support to high-risk groups like students can be enhanced in reducing suicide rates. The study emphasises the need for comprehensive measures that encompass mental health support and educational initiatives to address the multifaceted nature of suicide risk.

Thapa et al. (2015) reported that research has uncovered differences in the extent to which different cultural groups have knowledge about suicide. American Asian and White students ($M = 3.92$) and Western ($M = 3.72$) had higher levels of knowledge about suicide than other groups, according to the study. This implies that cultural influences may have a significant impact on suicide awareness. The outcomes emphasise the significance of cultural factors in determining suicide perceptions and advocate for educational interventions that consider various cultural influences. Culturally sensitive educational programs can enhance suicide prevention efforts by incorporating cultural elements to address the needs and perspectives of diverse cultural groups.

The study conducted by Alhaj et al. (2023) revealed that only 35.3% of the 392 participants who were surveyed had any knowledge of potential suicide indicators. Medical students made up a significant majority of the highly knowledgeable (83.3%). The dissimilarity highlights a significant disparity in understanding between medical students and other student groups, emphasising the necessity of more diverse and effective educational programs that cater to broader audiences. In addition, Alhaj et al. (2023) discovered that many students would opt for personal intervention when their friend was experiencing suicidal thoughts instead of seeking professional help. This choice emphasises the importance of integrating professional support services more effectively within schools and universities. However, the study found no significant relationship between educational

exposure and knowledge of suicidal symptoms ($P = 0.1$), suggesting that present-day educational methods may not be sufficient to bridge the knowledge gap.

Negative self-perceptions, existential confusion, academic stress, family problems (ranging from depression and suicide to hopelessness) are among the factors influencing attitudes toward suicide in South Korea as identified by Gselamu & Ha (2020). Despite differences in age and education, their study found that nursing students had generally positive attitudes towards suicide. This finding is consistent with the findings of Poreddi et al. (2021), who suggested that suicide education programs should be culturally sensitive to improve the care of individuals suffering from suicide.

Additionally, Wahab et al. (2021) found that students who participated in suicide prevention programs were more likely to identify potential suicide triggers. However, no correlation was found between attitudes towards suicide and general help-seeking behaviour, indicating that while such programs may improve the ability to recognise triggers, they do not necessarily influence students' attitudes towards seeking professional help. This highlights a need for educational programs that not only focus on trigger identification but also address broader aspects of help-seeking behaviour.

Relationship between Knowledge and Attitude towards Socio-Demographic Data

Cerel, J. & Streisand (2014) found that campus-based students have a more informed and thoughtful approach to suicide than their off-campus counterparts. This finding is based on the observation that students who live on campus are more likely to be informed about suicide. Students on campus receive a range of educational materials about suicide, including flyers distributed in residence halls, which often provide important information on warning signs, how to seek help and what resources are available. These materials are widely used across campus. These informational materials are a component of campus-wide initiatives to promote mental health and awareness. Conversely, students who live off-campus typically have a lower probability of accessing these resources and educational pursuits. The absence of these resources and support services for off-campus students may result in a less educated perspective on suicide, which has influenced attitudes towards the issue.

The study conducted by Norharlina, B. revealed a similar pattern. The impact of socio-demographic factors, particularly cultural influences, on suicide knowledge and attitudes was investigated by S. et al. (2014). The research discovered a significant influence of culture on attitudes towards suicide. According to the study, cultural factors such as culture, family values, and religion have a significant impact on suicide management practices in diverse communities. As an example, the research discovered significant differences in suicide rates among ethnic groups. Ethnic Indians had the highest completion rate of 35.85% while Malays were at 18.87%. This difference reflects the cultural and familial influences on suicide attitudes. According to the researchers, a comprehensive understanding of these cultural factors is essential for effectively managing and preventing suicide in Malaysia.

Previous research has shown that socio-demographic factors play a significant role in shaping suicide-related knowledge and attitudes among different sexes. Specifically, it is observed that girls are more knowledgeable about suicide than boys. Females are increasingly aware of mental health resources and information, which is in line with a wider trend. Even though there is more information available, research indicates that males and females have comparatively similar suicide attitudes. According to Aria (2015), female students may have a greater level of knowledge about suicide, but their attitudes are not significantly different from those of males.

The study also reveals that students' understanding and attitudes toward suicide are shaped by their parents' education. The presence of parents with a higher level of education in students is linked to their increased awareness of suicide, emphasising the importance of parental involvement in shaping their opinions. Additionally, the study indicates that a family history of mental illness is one of the primary factors behind many suicides.

In addition, Alhaj et al. (2023) examined the correlation between being educated about suicide and having knowledge of suicidal symptoms and signs. The findings showed a p-value of 0.1 for the correlation between being educated about suicide and having broader knowledge about its symptoms and signs. It suggests that merely providing individuals with education on suicide doesn't

necessarily improve their ability to identify the exact signs of suicidal behaviour. In addition, the research explored whether the degree course chosen affected students' ability to recognise suicidal symptoms and behaviours. They also noted that "neither the academic discipline nor the level of confidence in these students expressed a strong opinion on this question.". Beyond formal education and academic focus, there may be a greater emphasis on developing students' ability to identify and understand suicidal behaviour.

Conclusion:

The review highlights the complexity of suicide as a public health issue, deeply linked with mental health, social, and cultural factors. It underscores the importance of improving knowledge and addressing negative attitudes towards suicide, particularly among university students who are at a heightened risk. The findings suggest that while knowledge of suicide is critical, it is the attitudes influenced by socio-demographic factors that may play a more significant role in suicide prevention. Cultural and religious contexts, family support, and education levels are pivotal in shaping these attitudes. The study emphasises that it is important to design educational programs and interventions that address these socio-demographic factors, with the aim of creating a more supportive and informed environment for individuals who may be at risk. Enhanced comprehension and positive attitudes can lead to more effective approaches to decreasing suicide rates among those who are at risk.

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