Suicidal Feelings among an Egyptian Female University Students Sample

Lotaief F., Al Mahalawy N., Mahmoud A.N. and Abdel Al H.

Abstract

123female students collected from the scientific department, in the final year at girls' college and 123 students in the final year at faculty of art (Ain Shams University) were compared. Every student was subjected to a suicidal feeling questionnaire (Paykel et al. 1974) and to a structured sheet to collect data related to suicidal feelings. The findings suggest that suicidal feelings are highly presented (73%) in our female sample, but most of them are of minor degrees. There is no significant difference between girls studying scientific subjects and those studying literary subjects except in the distribution of suicidal feelings, but most of the suicidal feelings are of minor degrees in both samples. We found also that the risk factors of suicidal feelings among our female sample include single status, lack of understanding between siblings, insomnia, depressed mood, forgetfulness and somatic symptoms.

Introduction: The suicide rate is rising rapidly in young people. Suicide is the third leading cause of death in 15-24 years old age group after accidents and homicides (Kaplan et a.l 1994). In recent years, suicides among university students have received considerable publicity. Rees(1993) reported that university students have suicide rates far exceeding those of corresponding age group in the general population. Attempted suicide is a phenomena that seems to be more prevalent among educated people (Okasha et al 1986).

Women attempt suicide more than men (Kennedy et al., 1974 and Okasha et al., 1986), however, men commit suicide more than women (Sainsbury 1975). In England, a scientific study reported that there is an exchange in the role of men and women in the society and that women have more tendency to violence than before (Al-Ahram 1995).

InTour knowledge, there is no previous work that compared students studying scientific subjects tothose studying the literary subjects, as regards suicide behaviors. But previous studies (Darweesh et al., 1980 and Okasha et al., 1982) revealed differences between both groups in relation to substance about suicide abuse.

One of the myths is that "asking about suicidal ideation will bring the idea to the patient's mind or serve to "plant" the idea, increasing the chances that suicide will occur". Actually the opposite is true bringing up the subject of suicide and allowing patients to ventilate their possible motives, ideas and even plans, is often a good way to "diffuse" a suicidal situation (Risby et al., 1994). Suicidal feelings are the feelings that life is not worth living (Beck, 1967). Tomb(1995) reported that to assess the risk of suicide, we should investigate suicidal thoughts by asking questions of increasing specificity.

The aim of this study is to explore the suicidal feelings in a sample of female

university students, to compare the characteristics of suicidal feelings among those study scientific subjects and those study literary subjects and to investigate the risk factors of suicidal feelings among them.

Subjects and Method: During the academic year 1994-1995, we reruited 246 girls (123 from girls vollege science section & 123 from the faculty of Arts). Their ages ranged from 20 to 24. They were all final year students. Every student was subjected to (1) A structured self-rated sheet to collect demographic, psychological and social data. (2) A suicidal feeling questionnaire (Paykel et al., 1974) to assess the suicidal feelings in the past year. It is a self-rated questionnaire based on five questions of increasing specificity. Data collected, tabled, analyzed and statistically evaluated by using chi-square test and odds ratio.

Reslts and Comments:

Suicidal feelings:

The suicidal feelings are highly presented (73% of the total sample) and there is no significant difference between scientific subjects and literary students (Table 1). Stengel (1964) mentioned that it is not surprising that the student population as a whole show a relatively high incidence of suicide. There are many social factors the first one is of unmarried individuals. Another factor is the college system which breaks the university into a number of self-contained some-

Table (1) Suicidal Feelings

Suicidal Feelings	Girls' College (scientific section)	Faculty of Art	Total
Present	94 (76%)	85 (69%)	179 (73%)
Absent	29 (24%)	38 (31%)	67 (27%)
Total	123 (100%)	123 (100%)	246 (100%)

There is insignificant difference (X^2 =1.66, P>0.05) between the girls' college (scientificsection) and the faculty of art as regards the prevalence of suicidal feelings in the past year.

Table (2) Degrees of suicidal feelings

Degrees of suicidal feelings	Girls' Faculty (scientific study)	Faculty of Art	Total
1- Felt life was not worth living	39 (41%)	30 (35%)	69 (38.5%)
2- Wished they were dead.	15 (16%)	28 (33%)	43 (24%)
3- Thoughht of taking life while not serious. (not serious suicidal ideation).	27 (29%)	21 (25%)	48 (26.8 %)
4- Seriously considered taking life. (serious suicidal ideation)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	1 (0.6%)
5- Made an attempted suicide.	13 (14%)	5 (6%)	18 (10%)
Total	94 (100%)	85 (100%)	179 (100%)

There is significance difference (X^2 =9.98, P<0.05) between the girls' faculty (scientific study) and the faculty of art as regards the distribution of the degrees of suicidal

Table (3) :Methods of attempted suicide

Methods	Girls' Faculty (scientific study)	Faculty of Art	Total
Drug overdose	7 (43.75%)	5 (62.5%)	12 (50%)
Self-injury	6 (37.5%)	0 (0%)	6 (25%)
Jumping from height	2 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (12.5%)
Burning	1 (6.25%)	2 (25%)	3 (12.5%)
Total	16 (100%)	8 (100%)	24 (100%)

N.B.: 6 students (3 from each group) used two methods of attempted suicide

There is insignificant difference (X^2 =4.88, P>0.05) between the girls' faculty (scientific study) and the faculty of art as regards methods of attempted suicide

Table (4) Causes of suicidal feelings

Causes	Girls' Faculty (scientific study) n=94	Faculty of Art n = 85	Total n = 179
Emotional problems	68 (72%)	77 (90%)	145 (81%)
Scholastic troubles	70 (74%)	65 (76%)	135 (75%)
Financial problems	21 (23%)	19 (22%)	40 (47%)
Familial problems	18 (19%)	15 (18%)	33 (18%)
Health problems	3 (3%)	5 (6%)	8 (4%)
Others	0 (0%)	6 (7%)	6 (3%)

N.B.: Most of the students had more than one cause of suicidal feelings

There is insignificant difference (X^2 =7.52, P>0.05) between the girls' faculty (scientific study) and the faculty of art as regards causes of suicidal feelings.

Table (5) Risk factors

Items present in the last year	Students having suicidal feelings	Students having no suicidal feelings
Single status		
Yes	161 (90%)	31 (46 %)
No	18 (10%)	36 (54%)
	Odd ratio = 10.4	(P<0.001)
Lack of understanding with siblings		
Yes	52 (31 %)	2 (3%)
No	117 (6.9%)	55 (97%)
	Odd ratio =5.5	(P<0.05)
Insomnia		
Yes	128 (72%)	37 (55%)
No	51 (28%)	30 (45%)
	Odd ratio = 2	(P<0.001)
Deprressed mood		
Yes	129 (72%)	36 (55%)
No	50 (28%)	31 (45%)
	Odd ratio =2	(P<0.01)
Forgetfulness		
Yes	153 (85 %)	29 (43%)
No	25 (15%)	38 (57%)
	Odd ratio = 7.7	(P<0.01)
Somatic symptoms		
Yes	167 (93%)	43 (64%)
No	12 (7%)	24 (36%)
	Odd ratio =7.8	(P<0.05)
Visit psychiatrist		
Yes	5 (3%)	5 (7%)
No	174 (97%)	62 (93%)
	x^2=2.73	(P>0.05)

Ten students from each group have no siblings.

Odds ratio show that "single status, lack of understanding with siblings, insomnia, depressed mood, forgetfulness and somatic symptoms" represent risk factors for the occurence of suicidal feelings. There is no association between visit psychiatrist and the occurrence of suicidal feelings.

what isolated communities. Also the high academic standards and the lack of a rigid schedule of work are thought to be important. And it seems that the student experiences invokes more anxiety than other fields. The very high incidence in our work may be due to the self-report measure of suicidal feelings . Any how most of the suicidal feelings are of minor degrees.

62.5% of those reporting suicidal feelings, did not exceed "wishing themselves dead", and 26.8% have no serious suicidal ideation. So, we can conclude that about 89% of those reporting suicidal feelings have minor degrees of suicidal feelings (Table 2).

Only one student (0.6% of those reporting suicidal feelings) has serious suicidal ideation but infrequent and not persistent. The continuity of suicidal feelings, in the present study, did not exceed 3 days and the suicidal feelings occurred not more than five times in the last year. Asnis et al (1993) defined persistent ideation as ideation lasting for at least 7 days. Kaplan et al (1994) reported that when the suicidal ideation is infrequent, low intensity and transient, it is low risk for suicide. So, we can conclude that the only student who reported serious suicidal ideation has low risk for suicide.

Attempted suicide: Attempted suicide is highly presented (10% of those reporting suicidal feelings attempters) (Table 3). This high incidence may be due to the self-report sheet itself. Cox et al,. (1994) mentioned that prevalence figures on suicidal ideation and attempted suicide seem to be higher in studies that relied on patients' reports than studies that relied on clinicians' notes. Most individuals rule out this option very quickly or easily.

The commonest method employed by the attempters is drug overdose (50%). This result agrees with the previous studies as that of Okasha & Lotaief (1979), Kreitman (1981) and Nadim et al. (1983). Rees (1993) reported that; in both suicide and attempted suicide more women than men take drug overdoses whilst more violent methods are favored by men. The high percentage of drug overdose in attempted suicide may be because this method is an easy one where the intent to suicide is not high .

The second common method used for attempted suicide is self-injury (25%), this agrees with Kreitman (1981) and Al-Mahallawy (1985). Kaplan et al (1994) reported that the female to male ratio in the self-injury is almost 3 to 1. The cutters are usually in their twenties and may by single or married. Some referred to cutters as pseudosuicide.

A surprising result is that 25% of those attempting suicide employed violent methods jumping from high places and burning. Usually these methods are employed in successful suicide by the male (Kaplan et al., 1994). lBut in the case of women most probably these attempts were aborted; i.e. the action of jumping or burning was not completed. When the attempters start their actions in front of audience and before the firing or the falling down occur, the audience prevent them. One of the theoretical explanations of attempted suicide is "cry for help" rather than desire to die.

Causes of suicidal feelings: The commonest cause of suicidal feelings is the emotional problems (81%) (Table 4). A number of studies have interpreted the meaning of suicidal behaviors among adolescents as an effort to re-establish a close dependent relationship with a loved person or as an attempt to change that person's behavior rather than an attempt to die (Jacobziner,1960). The sec-

ond common cause of suicidal feelings is the scholastic problems (75%). Grootenhuis et al., (1994) reported that study problems are the second commonest cause for attempted suicide among university students especially the males. The third common cause of suicidal feelings is the financial problems (47%). We can explain how the financial problems could be a cause of suicidal feelings among the female students as follows: (1) The rich and the poor students sit together in the same desk. When the poor student observes the way by which the rich student spends money she feels unhappy and frustrated because she cannot buy what she needs. The frustration may be the cause to feel that life is not worth living or to experience suicidal feelings. (2) It also may be due to the variation in the role of women in society. Where some women became responsible for spending their money on their families or at least on themselves even when they are still students. Okasha et al., (1986) reported that there is a tendency for the attempters to come from overcrowded large families who live an uncomfortable life characterized by poor social functioning that boil down to acute frustration and as it was reported by Samaan (1964) the poor educated people showed the highest rate of attempts.

Risk factors of suicidal feelings: Our study showed that the single (unmarried) student is a risk factor for suicidal feelings (Table 5). This agrees with previous studies (Okasha et al., 1986; Barhe et al., 1985; Kreitman, 1981 and Murphy, 197) which reported that the unmarried and divorced persons have high rates of attempted suicides, possibly due to the unsettled emotional life or owing to the lovers' quarrels. Kaplan et al., (1994) reported that single, never-married persons register an overall rate of nearly double the rate for married persons.

We found a significant association between suicidal feelings and lack of understanding between siblings which may lead to the feelings of loneliness within their families. Asarnow (1992) found an association between attempted suicide in psychiatric disturbed children and lack of family support.

Insomnia and depressed mood are risk factors for suicidal feelings. This agrees with Al-Mahallawy (1985) who reported that insomnia is the most common symptom among the suicide attempters (65%), followed by depressed mood (62%). Insomnia was associated with both serious attempters (Rosen, 1970) and successful suicide (Baraclough & Pallis, 1975). Lyness et al. (1992) mentioned that depression is the most diagnosis of older adults who have attempted suicide. Cox et al., (1994) mentioned that patients, who reported suicidal ideation had significantly higher scores on the Beck depression inventory than those who did not report suicidal ideation.

Forgetfulness is a risk factor of suicidal feelings but Al-Mahallawy (1985) reported that only 1% of the attempters had amnesia. This could be explained by the fact that in the present study, the forgetfulness is most probably ordinary forgetfulness which is a common complaint among students. But in the previous study the amnesia is characterized by an inability to recall significant personal information beyond what could be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.

The somatic symptoms are risk factors for suicidal feelings. Okasha et al., (1981) reported that subjects experiencing suicidal feelings in the last year, had reported more somatic illness than non-suicidal group.

There was no association between suicidal feelings and visiting psychiatrist in the last year. So, the psychiatric symptoms associated with suicidal feelings are mild, not severe enough to lead the students to a psychiatrist. Okasha et al., (1981) mentioned that subjects with suicidal feelings reported more minor psychiatric symptoms than non-suicidal group.

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Authors

Lotaief F.
Professor of Psychiatry, Ain Shams University. Institute of Psychiatry

Al Mahalawy N.
Ass. Professor of Psychiatry, Ain Shams University. Institute of Psychiatry

Mahmoud A.N.
Lecturer of Psychiatry, Ain Shams University. Institute of Psychiatry

Abdel Al H.
Registrar of Psychiatry, Al- Mataria Hospital

Address of Correspondance

Prof. Lotaief F.
P.O. Box 22,Deir El- Malak Cairo 11657

المشاعر الإنتحارية لدى عينة مصرية من طالبات الجامعة

شملت هذه الدراسة ١٢٣ طالبه فى السنه النهائية للأقسام العلمية بكلية البنات و ١٢٣ طالبه من السنه النهائية بكلية الادآب بجامعة عين شمس. اثناء العام الدراسى١٩٩٤-١٩٩٥

وقد تم الاستقصاء عن المشاعر الإنتحارية خلال العام السابق للبحث بواسطة استبيان بايكال (١٩٧٤) كما تم الاستقصاء عن العوامل المنذرة بالخطر و التى تؤثر على المشاعر الإنتحارية بواسطة ورقة مشاهده خاصة.

اظهرت النتائج أن ٧٣٪ من عينة البحث كانت لديهم مشاعر إنتحارية خلال السنة السابقة و كانت معظم هذه المشاعر مشاعر بسيطة.

كما اظهرت النتائج أنه لا يوجد فروق جوهرية بين الطالبات الدارسات للمواد الأدبية و الطالبات الدارسات للمواد العلمية ما عدا فى توزيع شدة المشاعر الإنتحارية بين المجموعتين و مع وجود هذا الفرق فإن معظم المشاعر الإنتحارية كانت من الدرجة البسيطة .

كما وجدأيضا أن العوامل المنذرة بالخطر بين المشاعر الإنتحارية تشمل :العزوبية و عدم التفاهم بين الأخوة و الأرق و الشعور بالأكتئاب و النسيان و بعض الأعراض الجسمية.