

ATTEMPTED SUICIDE: CORRELATES OF LETHALITY



A study of young women
who have attempted suicide by drug overdose

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CONTENTS

SUMMARY	xv.
CERTIFICATION	xviii.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xix.
CHAPTER 1.	
NATURE OF THE PROBLEM	
I. Introduction	1.
II. The increasing rate of attempted suicide	2.
III. The preponderance of young women	5.
IV. Comment	7.
CHAPTER 2.	
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	
I. Introduction	8.
II. Definition of terms	9.
III. General descriptive and clinical data	11.
a. General demographic data	
i. Age	11.
ii. Nationality	12.
iii. Civil state	13.
iv. Socio-economic status	14.
b. Factors related to the suicide attempt	
i. Agent ingested	15.
ii. Source of agent ingested	17.
iii. Use of alcohol with or before the suicide attempt	19.
iv. 'Impulsivity' and the time of most recent contact with a 'helping agency'	23.

CHAPTER 2. (contd.)

c.	Past psychiatric history	26.
d.	Psychosexual functioning	30.
i.	Phase of menstrual cycle	30.
ii.	Pregnancy/miscarriage/termination of pregnancy	32.
e.	History of parental loss and childhood stress	34.
f.	History of personal violence	39.
g.	Family history of psychiatric illness	42.
h.	Contact with suicidal behaviour	43.
i.	Family contact	43.
ii.	Other contact	44.
i.	Clinical diagnosis	45.
j.	Interim comment	50.
IV.	Studies of specific groups	50.
a.	Studies of younger age groups	50.
b.	Studies pertaining specifically to young women who have attempted suicide	58.
c.	Comment	61.
V.	Suicidal intent and medical lethality	62.
a.	Introduction	62.
b.	Studies pertaining to suicidal intent and medical lethality	62.
c.	Research using the Suicidal Intent Scale	86.
d.	Comment	93.

CHAPTER 2. (contd.)

VI. Other attributes to be studied	94.
a. Psychiatric diagnosis - depression and and attempted suicide	94.
i. Introduction	94.
ii. Clinical reports	95.
iii. Comparative studies and research utilising objective measures of depression	98.
iv. Comment	105.
b. Hopelessness and attempted suicide	108.
c. Death anxiety in attempted suicide	115.
d. Personality and attempted suicide	121.
i. Introduction	121.
ii. Clinical assessment of personality	121.
iii. Use of standardised psychometric tests	126.
1. Projective techniques	127.
2. M.M.P.I.	127.
3. Other standardised techniques	131.
iv. Interim resume	136.
v. Attempted suicide and the hysterical personality	137.
vi. Locus of control and attempted suicide	142.
VI. Summary of the review of the literature	148.
a. General descriptive and clinical data	148.
i. General demographic data	148.

Chapter 2. (contd.)

ii. Circumstances related to the suicide attempt	149.
1. Drugs used	149.
2. 'Impulsivity' and time of most recent medical contact	149.
3. Alcohol and attempted suicide	149.
iii. Past psychiatric history	150.
iv. Psychosexual functioning	150.
v. Parental death and separation/divorce and childhood stress	150.
vi. History of personal violence	150.
vii. Family history of psychiatric illness	151.
viii. Contact with suicidal behaviour	151.
ix. Clinical diagnosis	151.
b. Studies of specific groups	151.
c. Suicidal intent and medical lethality	152.
d. Other attributes to be studied	153.
i. Depression	153.
ii. Hopelessness	154.
iii. Death anxiety	154.
iv. Personality and attempted suicide	154.
1. General	154.
2. The hysterical personality	155.
3. Locus of control dimension of personality	156.
e. Comment	156.

CHAPTER 3.	THE PRESENT STUDY	
I.	Hypotheses to be tested	158.
	a. Related to general demographic, descriptive and diagnostic data	158.
	b. Related to instruments used	159.
II.	Subjects	161.
	a. Age limit	161.
	b. Definition of attempted suicide	162.
	c. The research setting	164.
	d. Selection of subjects	166.
	i. High lethality subjects	167.
	ii. Subjects of lesser lethality	169.
	iii. Comparison subjects	173.
III.	Method	175
	a. Suicide attempters	175.
	i. Location of interview	175.
	ii. Interview technique	176.
	iii. Administration of questionnaires	177.
	iv. General problems	178.
	v. Comment	180.
	b. Comparison subjects	180.
IV.	Summary of subject selection and data acquisition	181.

CHAPTER 3. (contd.)

V. Instruments	183.
a. General descriptive and clinical data	183.
b. Reported childhood stress factors	185.
c. Suicidal Intent Scale	189.
d. Levine-Pilowsky Depression (LPD) Questionnaire	191.
e. Hopelessness Scale (HS)	197.
f. Death Anxiety Scale (DAS)	198.
g. Hysteroid-Obsessoid Questionnaire (HOQ)	199.
h. Adult Nowicki and Strickland Internal-External (ANSIE) locus of control scale	201.
VI. Statistical analysis of data	202.

CHAPTER 4.

RESULTS

I. Comparison of groups of differing lethality	205.
a. General descriptive and clinical data	205.
i. General demographic data	205.
1. Age	205.
2. Nationality	206.
3. Civil state	206.
4. Current household	209.
5. Socio-economic status	210.
6. Presence of children	211.
ii. Circumstances related to the overdose	212.
1. Referral to hospital	212.
2. Drug(s)/agent(s) ingested	213.
3. Number of drugs ingested	215.
4. Source of principal drug ingested	216.
5. Use of alcohol with overdose	217.

CHAPTER 4. (contd.)

iii.	Recent contact with 'helping agency'	218.
	1. Time of most recent contact	218.
	2. Nature of 'helping agency'	220.
	3. Most recent contact with medical practitioner	221.
	4. Nature of most recent medical contact	222.
iv.	Past psychiatric history	223.
	1. History of previous assessment/treatment by a psychiatrist or trainee psychiatrist	223.
	2. History of previous in-patient treatment	223.
	3. History of previous out-patient treatment	225.
	4. Past history of attempted suicide	226.
	5. Time of most recent overdose	227.
	6. History of drug abuse	228.
v.	History of use of alcohol	229.
vi.	Psychosexual functioning	230.
	1. Phase of menstrual cycle	230.
	2. Possibility of pregnancy, history of miscarriage, history of termination of pregnancy	231.
vii.	History of parental death or separation/divorce	232.
viii.	Reported childhood stress	234.
ix.	History of personal violence	237.
x.	Report of alcohol abuse by spouse	238.
xi.	Family history of psychiatric treatment	239.
xii.	Contact with suicidal behaviour in others	240.

CHAPTER 4. (contd.)

xiii. Clinical diagnosis	242.
1. Primary illness diagnosis	242.
2. Other diagnoses	243.
3. Personality diagnosis	244.
b. Other data	245.
i. Suicidal intent	245.
ii. Depression	248.
iii. Hopelessness	252.
iv. Death anxiety	253.
v. Hysteroid/obsessoid dimension of personality	254.
vi. Locus of control dimension of personality	255.
II. Attempted suicide patients v. comparison subjects	256.
a. Introduction	256.
b. General descriptive and clinical data	258.
i. General demographic data	258.
1. Nationality	258.
2. Civil state	259.
3. Current household	259.
4. Socio-economic status	260.
5. Presence of children	261.
ii. Recent contact with 'helping agency'	262.
1. Comment	262.
2. Recent contact with medical practitioner	262.

CHAPTER 4. (contd.)

iii.	Past psychiatric history	263.
	1. History of previous assessment/ treatment by a psychiatrist or trainee psychiatrist	263.
	2. Past history of attempted suicide	264.
	3. History of drug abuse	265.
iv.	History of use of alcohol	266.
v.	Psychosexual functioning	266.
	1. Phase of menstrual cycle	266.
	2. Possibility of pregnancy/history of termination of pregnancy/history of miscarriage	267.
vi.	History of parental death or separation/divorce	269.
vii.	Reported childhood stress factors	271.
viii.	History of personal violence	274.
ix.	Report of alcohol abuse by spouse	275.
x.	Family history of psychiatric treatment	276.
xi.	Contact with suicidal behaviour in others	276.
xii.	Clinical diagnosis	277.
	1. Primary illness diagnosis	277.
	2. Other diagnoses	277.
	3. Personality diagnosis	278.
c.	Other data	278.
	i. Questionnaire scores	278.

CHAPTER 5.

DISCUSSION

I.	General comments	282.
a.	Introduction	282.
b.	Research design	282.
c.	Patient selection	283.
d.	Feedback effects of attempted suicide	284.
e.	Control/comparison population	286.
f.	Statistical analysis	287.
II.	Discussion relevant to specific results	288.
a.	General descriptive and clinical data	288.
i.	General demographic data	288.
1.	Age	288.
2.	Nationality	289.
3.	Civil state	290.
4.	Socio-economic status	292.
5.	Presence of children	294.
ii.	Circumstances related to the overdose	297.
1.	Referral to hospital	297.
2.	The nature of drug(s)/agent(s) ingested	297.
3.	Multiple drugs/agents	298.
4.	The number of tablets/capsules ingested	299.
5.	Source of principal drug/agent ingested	300.
6.	Use of alcohol with or immediately before the overdose	300.

CHAPTER 5. (contd.)

iii.	a.	Recent contact with 'helping agency'	306.
		1. Time of most recent contact	306.
		2. Nature of 'helping agency'	307.
		3. Nature of most recent medical contact	307.
iv.	a.	Past psychiatric history	308.
		1. History of previous assessment/ treatment by a psychiatrist or trainee psychiatrist	308.
		2. Past history of attempted suicide	312.
		3. Past history of drug abuse	313.
v.		Psychosexual functioning	314.
	a.	Phase of menstrual cycle	314.
	b.	Possibility of pregnancy/history of miscarriage and termination of pregnancy	316.
vi.		History of parental death or separation/divorce	317.
vii.		Reported childhood stress factors	320.
viii.		History of personal violence	322.
ix.		Family history of psychiatric treatment	325.
	x.	Contact with suicidal behaviour	326.
xi.		Clinical diagnosis	327.
		1. Illness diagnosis	327.
		2. Personality diagnosis	329.

CHAPTER 5. (contd.)

b. Other data	331.
i. Suicidal intent	331.
ii. Depression	335.
1. Introduction	335.
2. Depression scores	336.
3. Total number classified as depressed	337.
4. Frequency of endogenous depression	338.
5. Distinguishing symptoms and the 'functional shift'	339.
6. Limitations of the present study	343.
7. Implications	346.
8. Conclusion	351.
iii. Hopelessness	352.
iv. Death anxiety	357.
v. Hysteroid/obsessoid dimension of personality	359.
vi. Locus of control dimension of personality	367.

CHAPTER 6.

CONCLUSIONS

I. Summary of results	373.
a. Comparison of groups of differing lethality	373.
i. General descriptive and clinical data	373.
ii. Other data	375.
b. Attempted suicide patients v. comparison subjects	375.
i. General descriptive and clinical data	375.
ii. Other data	378.
II. Overview	380.

APPENDICES

I. General descriptive and clinical data	385.
II. Assessment of socio-economic status	391.
III. Clinical diagnosis	392.
IV. Childhood stress factors in adult mental health	403.
V. Suicidal Intent Scale	405.
VI. (a). Levine-Pilowsky Depression (LPD) Questionnaire	407.
(b). LPD discriminant functions	410.
VII. Hopelessness Scale (HS)	411.
VIII. Death Anxiety Scale (DAS)	413.
IX. Hysteroid-Obsessoid Questionnaire (HOQ)	414.
X. Adult Nowicki-Strickland Internal-External (ANSIE) locus of control scale	417.
XI. High Lethality (HL) patient vignettes	420.
XII. Intermediate Lethality (IL) patient vignettes	450.
XIII. Low Lethality (LL) patient vignettes	480.
XIV. Comparison group subject vignettes	509.
BIBLIOGRAPHY	519.

SUMMARY

This thesis reports a study of women aged 18 to 30 following attempted suicide by drug overdose, and compares three groups of differing medical lethality. These patients have also been contrasted with women of similar age attending a community health centre.

Basic demographic and descriptive clinical data have been compared, and a more detailed examination has been made of reported childhood stress factors, suicidal intent, depression, hopelessness, death anxiety and the hysteroid/obsessoid and locus of control dimensions of personality.

There were a number of significant differences between the groups of differing lethality. More of the low lethality group were married (or in a de facto relationship), and had consulted a medical practitioner in the forty-eight hours immediately before their suicide attempt. However, more of the high lethality group had had a psychiatric consultation as their last medical contact.

The high lethality group took significantly more tablets/capsules, but were less likely to take alcohol, both with the overdose and in general. The scores on the Suicidal Intent Scale demonstrated a significant positive relationship between suicidal intent and medical lethality, suggesting that the lethality of an attempt is a guide to the assessment of suicidal intent. Subjects of high lethality also scored as significantly

more hopeless on the Hopelessness Scale, and more in an internal manner on a locus of control scale, indicating that they perceived themselves to be more in control of their situation, and less reliant on outside factors. There were no significant differences between the groups on scores obtained by the Death Anxiety Scale and the Hysteroid-Obsessoid Questionnaire.

In addition to general demographic and descriptive differences between the attempters and the comparison group, which were consistent with the literature, attempters scored significantly more in an external manner on a locus of control scale, denoting that they viewed themselves and their actions as being more influenced by outside factors. This suggests that a sense of responsibility for one's own actions may have relevance in both reducing the predisposition to suicidal behaviour, and in the treatment of such patients. There were marked differences in the reports of childhood stress between the attempters and the comparison group, whereas the differences between the groups of differing lethality were no greater than might have been expected by chance alone. There was also a trend, which approached significance, for attempters to be more obsessoid than the comparison group, a finding contrary to that anticipated.

The results of the Levine-Pilowsky Depression (LPD) Questionnaire demonstrated that the attempters were significantly depressed in contrast to the comparison group, but there was no association between the degree of depression and lethality.

Furthermore, approximately one-third of the patients of each lethality group were allocated to the endogenous class of depression by the LPD Questionnaire, indicating that certain patients have symptoms which have been attributed to a 'functional shift'. This finding suggests that the precise nature of depression in young women who attempt suicide is by no means clear.

These results may have relevance in the clinical situation. Thus for young women between the ages of 18 and 30 years, those most at risk for making suicide attempts of high lethality appear to be those who are not married (or in a de facto relationship); use alcohol less often; have had recent contact with a psychiatrist; and have a greater degree of suicidal intent and hopelessness. Furthermore, there are trends for them to be those of higher socio-economic status; to have less history of violence, both used and sustained; to more often demonstrate schizoid personality traits and to be closer to the obsessoid pole of the hysteroid-obsessoid personality continuum; and to be more likely to have had previous psychiatric consultation, and to have made a previous suicide attempt.

Thus the findings of this study may provide indices, not only for assessing a patient's potential for attempting suicide, but also for assessing whether such an attempt would be of high or low lethality.