



Research Snapshot

The link between non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal behaviours



What is this research about?

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a significant risk factor for suicidal behaviour. Research has shown that history of self-injury is one of the strongest predictors of suicide attempts. This study conducted a systematic review of the literature to examine mechanisms through which this link occurs. Although NSSI and suicidal behaviours are forms of self-injurious behaviours, these behaviours differ on the basis of intention, frequency, and lethality.

NSSI is direct and deliberate bodily harm without suicidal intent and includes self-cutting, head-banging, burning, and scratching to the point of bleeding. Suicidal behaviours are directly self-injurious (e.g., suicide attempt, suicide) with the intent to end one's life and includes hanging, strangulation, and jumping from heights. Despite the differences between NSSI and suicidal behaviours, these behaviours can often co-occur. Little attention has been paid to why the behaviours may be associated.

What did the researchers do?

A systematic review was completed to examine the association between NSSI and suicidal behaviours among adolescents and adults. Researchers conducted a review of studies that differentiated and compared NSSI and suicidal behaviours using clinical guidelines. Thirty-one studies were selected for review. Eighteen studies examined NSSI as a risk factor for suicidal behaviour and 13 studies compared individuals engaging in NSSI to individuals engaging in suicidal behaviours.

What you need to know:

NSSI and suicidal behaviours are different behaviours that often co-occur. Little attention has been given to as to why these behaviours are linked. Since NSSI is considered one of the most significant risk factor for suicidal behaviours, it is crucial to examine the mechanism through which this occurs. Three theories have been proposed to explain the link between NSSI and suicidal behaviours. An integrated model of these theories is introduced.

What did the researchers find?

NSSI was a significant predictor of suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Individuals engaging in NSSI were significantly more likely to report a suicide attempt compared to individuals that did not engage in NSSI. Some studies found that more frequent NSSI was predictive of more frequent suicide attempts. The association between NSSI and suicidal behaviour was stronger among individuals engaging in more severe forms of NSSI.

The majority of studies determined that individuals who reported a history of NSSI and suicidal behaviours were at higher risk for psychopathology and psychosocial impairment than individuals who engaged in NSSI or suicidal behaviours only.

Individuals engaging in multiple forms of self-harm may represent a more severe clinical group. Many studies suggested that individuals engaging in suicidal behaviours were more likely to report depression, stressful life events, childhood abuse, and disordered eating compared to individuals that engaged in NSSI.

Researchers examined explanations of the link between NSSI and suicidal behaviour and proposed three separate theories. In the **Gateway Theory**, NSSI precedes the development of suicidal behaviours as suicidal behaviours stem from the escalating NSSI behaviours. NSSI may be a gateway form of self-injury that leads to more extreme forms of self-injury such as suicidal behaviours.

In the **Third Variable Theory**, the co-occurrence of NSSI and suicidal behaviour is accounted for by a third variable. It may not be that NSSI increases risk for suicidal behaviour but that having a psychiatric disorder increases risk for both NSSI and suicidal behaviour. Finally, in **Joiner's Theory of Acquired Capability for Suicide**, Joiner suggested that an individual must overcome the fear and pain associated with suicidal behaviours to end one's life. This theory proposes that NSSI may habituate an individual to the fear and pain associated with suicidal self-harming behaviours.

The authors of this article proposed an integrated model that combines the three examined theories. The model suggests that engaging in NSSI will directly predict engaging in suicidal behaviours, as suggested by the Gateway Theory. The relationship between NSSI and suicidal behaviours is strengthened when an individual experiences a high level of intrapersonal distress. In line with the Third Variable Theory, it is proposed that shared risk factors (i.e., Borderline Personality Disorder characteristics) will contribute to the high occurrence of both NSSI and suicidal behaviours. Lastly, as predicted by Joiner, the model suggests that individuals engaging in NSSI will have an acquired capability for suicide and will engage in suicidal behaviours. This link between NSSI and acquired capability for suicide increases with the severity of NSSI.

The link between acquired capability of suicide and eventual suicidal behaviour depends on the individual's perceived burdensomeness and belongingness.

How can you use this research?

There is a distinction between NSSI and suicidal behaviours though they are often combined in clinical practice. Practitioners now have a better understanding of the risk factors associated with both NSSI and suicide and are better able to judge the severity of their clients' self-injurious behaviours. Practitioners can use the integrated model to predict the likelihood of their clients engaging in suicidal behaviours.

Original Research Article:

For a complete description of the research and findings, please see the full research article:

Hamza, C.A., Stewart, S.L., & Willoughby, T. (2012). Examining the link between nonsuicidal self-injury and suicidal behaviour: A review of the literature and an integrated model. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 32, 482-495.

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