Impact of Social Support on Symptoms of Depression and Loneliness in Survivors of Suicide

Erika Spino, DNP, PMHNP-BC; Kirstyn Kameg, DNP, PMHNP-BC; Tom Cline, MBA, Ph.D.

Robert Morris University 6001 University Blvd. Moon Township, PA 15108

SPECIFIC AIM

To determine if there is a correlation between depressive and loneliness symptoms and the social support available in this cohort of survivors

It was hypothesized that a positive correlation will exist between significant social support and decreased levels of loneliness and depression

IDENTIFIED PROBLEM

- In the U.S. suicide is the 11th leading cause of death, accounting for about 36,000 deaths annually
- Estimated that there may be 10 survivors to every completed suicide
- A survivor of suicide is a family member or friend of a person who died by suicide
- Death of a family member or loved one by suicide is a traumatic incident that impacts a survivor’s ability to function
- Compounding this trauma is a lack of bereavement programs & lack of research re: their effectiveness
- Even less evidence is available regarding defining a survivor of suicide’s social support network, their emotional reactions and quality of life

METHODOLOGY

- Design
  - Descriptive, correlational secondary data analysis
    - Analysis from 2 pilot studies that investigated test-messaging as a method of enhancing social support and reducing symptoms of depression and loneliness in survivors of suicide.
- Sample/Setting
  - Non-probability, purposive sample of 44 individuals over the age of 18 from Pittsburgh area
  - 75% were female
  - Ages ranged from 20 to 70, with a mean of 44
  - 73% were Caucasian, 22.7% African-American, and 4.5% Hispanic.
  - 57% of participants earned at least college degrees

MATERIALS/PROCEDURE

- Measures
  - Demographic and Mobile Literacy Questionnaire
  - Beck Depression Inventory II (BDI II)
  - UCLA Loneliness Scale
  - Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ)
  - SF-12v2 Health Survey
- Procedure
  - The above scales were completed to assess for a correlation between the scores on the depression and loneliness scales and the social support scale

DATA ANALYSIS

- Analysis was performed using version 21 of Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS)
- Descriptive statistics examined demographic information
- Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient
- Explored the relationship between social support network and depression and loneliness

RESULTS

- Multiple linear regression model
  - BDI as the outcome and personal network (Norbeck 1-amount of members listed) and relationship score (Norbeck 2-identifies type of relationship with an amount of support) as the predictors
  - Significant at the 95% confidence level: F (2, 39) = 3.48, p = 0.04
    - Thus, higher personal network and relationship scores are statistically associated with lower BDI
- Simple linear regression models:
  - BDI as the outcome and total support score as the predictor
    - Total Support Score=How much each support member provided in affection, affirmation, and aid-ranges from 89-799
      - Achieved significance at the 99% confidence level, F (1, 40) = 10.43, p = 0.002
    - BDI as the outcome and “physical 1” as the predictor
      - The model was significant at the 99% confidence level, F (1, 42) = 10.02, p = 0.003
      - Less difficulty with physical health is statistically association with lower BDI

DISCUSSION

- Results of this study expand on earlier findings that discuss the clinical importance of how the bereavement process differs in survivors of suicide
  - Findings suggest that social support identified by survivors of suicide and optimal physical health are associated with lower levels of depression
  - Participants’ depressive scores decreased when less difficulty with physical health was reported and these findings are consistent with the current literature

LIMITATIONS

- This study has several limitations:
  - Self-report instruments
  - Correlation does not imply causation
  - Small and generally homogenous sample

IMPLICATIONS

- Literature suggests that survivor’s apparent social support is coupled with a reduced amount of grief and hopelessness
- Opportunities to aid patients in identifying social support include:
  - Assisting survivors in working through their period of grief
  - Strengthening the relationship between patients and providers
- A key focus of mental health professionals’ assessment and intervention strategies should integrate:
  - Health promotion techniques (exercise/nutrition) in order to have their patients achieve optimal physical health

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Larger and more diverse sample
  - Allow conclusions to be more generalizable to the target population
- Longitudinal study
  - Support if long term associations with support groups exist in survivors and how they ultimately influence the grief process
- Identifying other types of social support
  - Technology as a form of communication which may allow a more comfortable setting to divulge how the survivors are progressing during their period of bereavement

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- kaplan@jhcf.org
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- 724-454-5448
- Cassie LaRue DNP, PMHNP-BC
- 724-454-5448
- elspi@rmu.edu

Contact information

Eriska Spino, DNP, PMHNP-BC
724-454-5448
elspi@rmu.edu

Grant

LaRue DNP, PMHNP-BC

724-454-5448

Grantsman

Shanet Kameg, DNP, PMHNP-BC

724-454-5448

Kameg

Elizabeth Laffleur, PhD, MLS

724-454-5448

Laffleur