

Self-Harm and Suicide: Positive Pastoral Strategies for Schools

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It is now recognized that the internet plays an increasingly important role in the lives, treatment and recovery of self-harming and suicidal young people. Over the last decade, internet-based online support and advice sites have witnessed a huge growth in popularity among young people because of the anonymity and accessibility they offer. Although there is much debate about whether the internet is helpful or harmful in terms of influencing suicidal and self-harming behaviour in young people, and although research into this area is still in its infancy, a recent comprehensive review by Durkee et al. (2011) concluded that it was more helpful than harmful overall. Message boards, groups and forums dedicated to self-harm and suicidal behaviour, where young people can meet and share their experiences and offer each other help and support, can be advantageous and helpful if moderated well by experienced professionals.

Research Examples

Current literature on how internet use influences self-harming and suicidal behaviour in young people presents a picture of contradictions. For example, Whitlock et al. (2006) argue that there are negatives and positives to internet message boards that deal with issues of self-harm in the US. Their findings indicate that online interactions clearly provide essential support for otherwise isolated individuals. They also argue that internet message boards spread practices of self-harm among young people in the US, and that message boards communicate, encourage and normalize means of self-harm.

Research by Baker and Fortune (2008) looked at young adults' use of websites dedicated to self-harm and suicidal behaviour in the UK and found that young people use websites as a way of coping. Participants in their study wrote of how the sites contributed to their recovery. They described the self-harm and suicide websites that they used as places of empathic understanding; as communities that provided emotional support, valuable information and advice and friendship. For some, interacting with fellow users was reported as a way of managing severe social and psychological distress, which was a preferable alternative to self-harming, and this could lead to a reduction in the frequency of these behaviours:

Since using the boards to tell people how I felt and stuff I definitely think the frequency of my s/h has decreased a lot. I know that if I feel I need to do it I can go on the boards or on msn and someone will be there who I can talk to, and get my feelings out as well as being a way to distract myself. (Baker and Fortune, 2008, p. 120 – young female)

References

- Baker, D. and Fortune, S. (2008), 'Understanding self-harm and suicide websites: A qualitative interview study of young adult website users'. *Crisis*, 29(3): 118–22.
- Durkee, T., Hadlaczky, G., Westerlund, M. and Carli, V. (2011), 'Internet pathways in suicidality: A review of the evidence'. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 8: 3938–52.
- Whitlock, J. L., Powers, J. L. and Eckenrode, J. (2006), 'The virtual cutting edge: The internet and adolescent self-injury'. *Developmental Psychology*, 42(3): 407–17.

Evidence suggests that the internet offers huge scope for prevention efforts. While there are some good sites out there that offer great potential, teachers also need to be aware of the possible dangers of some message boards to encourage and normalize means of self-harm. As more and more young people turn to the internet rather than professionals for help and support, there is a need for those responsible for pastoral care in schools to be aware of which sites will be of most benefit to them and assist them in locating helpful, supportive resources online. A number of useful sites are listed below:

YouthNet is the UK's first exclusively online charity. YouthNet provides emotional support to young people through online advice and guidance via *TheSite.org* – the guide to life for 16- to 25-year-olds. Links to helpful sites, forums and message boards for young people can be found here: www.thesite.org/healthandwellbeing/mentalhealth/selfharm

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional well-being and mental health of children and young people. This link offers learning materials and resources for schools and professional development training on emotional well-being for educational professionals: <http://youngmindsinschools.org.uk/>

Links to helpful sites, forums and message boards for young people can be found here: www.vik.org.uk/links/

ChildLine is a free 24-hour counselling service for children and young people in the UK provided by the NSPCC. ChildLine deals with any issue which causes distress or concern to children and young people. They provide an online counselling service and also have supportive online message boards and groups for young people to access: www.childline.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx

Selfharm.co.uk delivers caring, child-centred work which focuses on the emotional and social needs of all young people. This website offers a safe online space to inform and support young people who self-harm, as well as cater for the needs of their siblings, parents and friends. It also provides information and training for professionals such as youth workers, teachers and social workers, and supportive, well-moderated user-groups and forums for young people to access.