

The Impact of Holidays on Suicide

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Statement of the Problem

Despite the inherent joy of holidays, there is a significant amount of stress and negative emotions leading many to wonder what effect holidays have on suicide as a whole. It is because of this concern that this white paper has been developed.

Summary of the relevant literature

A common misperception concerning suicide is that during major public holidays, such as Christmas or Memorial Day, there is an increase in suicide due to feelings of loneliness or burdensomeness. According to published research, there is actually a dip in suicide a few days before and on public holidays followed by a peak just after. The dip in suicides before and during is somewhat larger than the peak after, creating a net decrease (Phillips & Liu, 1980).

The majority of the research looking at the impact of holidays on suicides was conducted in the seventies and eighties. A few more recent studies have looked at this connection and have reported much of the same results. Overall, suicide decreases just before and on US holidays (Bridges, 2004; Curtis, Loy, & Karnilowicz, 1986; Phillips & Liu, 1980; Lester, 1987; Phillis & Willis, 1987). Many of these studies also found a slight peak in suicide following holidays (Brådvik & Berglund, 2003; Wenz, 1977). The peak of suicide following holidays is seen the most on New Year's Day, July 4th, and Labor Day (Wenz, 1977; Phillis & Willis, 1987). However, according to Phillips and Liu (1980), the dip in suicides before and during is somewhat larger than the peak after creating a net decrease, suggesting holidays may act as more of a protective factor. In a literature review, Stack (2000) further supported this assertion with his findings that social integration during holiday periods tended to reduce suicide risk.

A recent study, looking at attempts and suicides by poisoning, supported the claim that holidays overall act as a protective factor against suicide (Beauchamp et al., 2014). When looking at the holidays, researchers compared the three days before and three days after and found there were no significant differences in the number of suicide attempts or suicides. It is worth noting that Beauchamp and colleagues did find that New Year's Day had significantly higher attempts and suicides when compared to the 3 days before and after the control dates of March, June, and September 15th.

Looking outside the United States it seems that the pattern surrounding holidays and suicides holds true for other nations around the world. Jessen and Jessen (1999) looked at 24,388 suicide attempts by individuals 15 years and older residing in over 11 different countries in Europe and found that suicide attempts decreased on and before major public European holidays. Nishi and colleagues also reported similar finding in Japan (2000). It appears that it is not the day of the holiday but the cultural importance associated with a holiday that influences patterns of suicide and suicide attempts. An article published in 1993 by Schreiber and colleagues examined the

monthly distribution of completed suicides by Israeli soldiers during the 7-year period of 1984-1990. They found a decrease in suicide during the months of September and October. One possible explanation for the decrease may be related to the Jewish holidays of Yom Kippur, Rosh Hashana, and Succot which fall during these months. They also observed a peak in suicide in the month of December (Schreiber, Dycian, Kaplan, & Bleich, 1993).

Although there is an overall dip in suicide, it occurs before the holiday. After a typical holiday, suicide increases. Stack (2000) argues that this is because of “broken promises.” Holidays have a tendency to raise expectations for individual fulfillment and enjoyment. When these expectations are not fulfilled by the holiday, suicide risk can increase. An analysis of daily data from 1973 to 1980 lent support to this thesis (Stack, 2000).

Gaps in the literature

Information gathered on the effects of holidays and suicide is dated, with the exception of the recent publication from Beauchamp and Yin. There has been considerable cultural and societal change since the seventies and eighties that may impact the relationship between suicide and holidays. Additionally, there is a paucity of published data looking specifically at how the holidays impact suicides within the military population.

Recommendations

With the majority of the studies being dated it may be advantageous to examine data from the past ten years to see if the same pattern prevails. A place to start may be the CDC’s WISQARS™ (Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System).

Due the lack of published literature on how the holidays impact suicides within the military population, it is recommended that data be analyzed to see if this pattern holds true for this population. Military populations have unique stressors during holidays (e.g. deployment) which may lead to a difference in the effects of the holidays and suicide rates.

There may be some benefit for researchers to further examine what causes the slight increase in suicides after holidays. This may provide insight into how to best intervene and treat an individual experiencing suicidality during a time of possible increased risk.

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