

Suicide as (health) behaviour: towards a psychological understanding of suicidal behaviour

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Abstract

Suicide and attempted suicide are major public health concerns with complex aetiologies which encompass a multifaceted array of risk and protective factors. There is growing recognition that we need to move beyond psychiatric categories to further our understanding of the pathways to both. Recent approaches have conceptualised suicide as a (health) behaviour, such that an individual makes a decision to take their own life, therefore an appreciation of the psychology of the suicidal mind is central to suicide prevention. Another key challenge is that our understanding of the factors that determine behavioural enactment (i.e., which individuals with suicidal thoughts will act on these thoughts) is limited. Although a comprehensive understanding of these determinants of suicidality requires an appreciation of biological, psychological and social perspectives, the focus in this presentation is primarily on the psychological determinants of self-harm and suicide. To address these issues, I will describe the Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) Model of Suicidal Behaviour (O'Connor, 2011) which derives from health, social and clinical psychological theory. This tripartite model maps the relationship between background factors and trigger events, and the development of suicidal ideation/intent through to suicidal behaviour. I will present a selection of research studies to illustrate how psychological factors increase suicide risk and what can be done to ameliorate such risk. The implications for the prevention of self-harm and suicide will also be discussed.

Brief profile

Rory O'Connor PhD CPsychol AFBPsS FAcSS is Professor of Health Psychology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland where he is also Head of the Mental Health & Wellbeing Research Group. He is a Past President of the International Academy of Suicide Research and a current Vice President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention. Rory leads the Suicidal Behaviour Research Laboratory (Web: www.suicideresearch.info; Twitter: @suicideresearch) at Glasgow, one of the leading suicide/self-harm research groups in the UK. He has published extensively in the field of suicide and self-harm, specifically concerning the psychological processes which precipitate suicidal behaviour and self-harm. In addition, he is author of *Understanding Suicidal Behaviour* (with Noel Sheehy), co-editor of *The Routledge Major Works Series on Suicide* (with Keith Hawton) and of the *International Handbook of Suicide Prevention* (2nd edition with Jane Pirkis) and of *The Routledge Major Works Series on Health Psychology* (forthcoming, with Daryl O'Connor). He was also the UK National Representative for the International Association for Suicide Prevention and is a member of the American Association of Suicidology. He serves on the Scientific Review Board of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and is an Associate Editor of *Archives of Suicide Research, Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior and Behavior Therapy*. Rory acts as an advisor to a range of national and international organisations including national governments on the areas of suicide and self-harm.



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