



Original article

Suicidal Behaviors in College Students: Frequency, Sex Differences, and Mental Health Correlates Including Sluggish Cognitive Tempo

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 A B S T R A C T

Purpose: To (1) describe rates of suicidal behaviors in a sample of college students, (2) evaluate sex differences, and (3) provide a preliminary examination of the unique association of sluggish cognitive tempo (SCT) symptoms and other mental health dimensions in relation to suicidal behaviors in college students.

Methods: Participants were 1,704 college students from two universities who completed measures assessing mental health symptoms and suicidal behaviors (i.e., past ideation/attempts, past-year ideation, disclosure of intent to commit suicide to another person, and likelihood of a future suicide attempt).

Results: Four percent of participants reported a previous suicide attempt and 2.2% indicated that it was likely they would attempt suicide someday. 7.5% reported thinking about killing themselves often in the past year; 41.4% of these participants reported they had never told someone they might attempt suicide. Approximately one quarter (24%) of participants were classified with suicide risk based on an empirically established cutoff score, though rates differed between women (26.1%) and men (20.4%). Women were also more likely than men to report a previous suicide attempt and to tell someone else about their suicidal ideation. In regression models, depression was the strongest correlate of suicidal behaviors. Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder symptoms were unassociated with suicidal behaviors when accounting for internalizing symptoms. SCT remained significantly associated with increased suicidal behaviors beyond other mental health dimensions including depression.

Conclusions: A substantial minority of college students report suicidal behaviors, with sex differences dependent on the specific behavior examined. This study provides the first evidence linking SCT to suicidal behaviors in young adults.

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 IMPLICATIONS AND
 CONTRIBUTION

Sluggish cognitive tempo symptoms may be an important area for consideration in future suicide prevention and intervention programming. However, replication and further study examining mechanisms of this association are warranted.

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young adults, including college students [1]. In an effort to advance prevention and intervention efforts, substantial research attention has

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focused on suicidal behaviors (e.g., ideation and attempts), which are common in college students [2,3]. For example, in the 2016 National College Health Assessment II, 9.8% of college students indicated that they seriously considered suicide in the past year, and 1.5% reported a suicide attempt in the past year [4]. In a survey of over 15,000 undergraduate college students, 18% reported having ever seriously considered attempting suicide and 8% reported attempting suicide at least once [3]. Rates of suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts are far higher among this age group than older adults [5]. Fewer studies have examined whether students

thinking about suicide tell others about these thoughts, though one study found that almost half (46%) of undergraduate students who seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year did not tell anyone else about their thoughts [3]. Despite the increased research attention devoted to suicide in college students, a number of studies examining rates of suicidal behaviors in this population relied on a composite score or single item of suicidal behaviors [6–10]. The present study builds on these previous studies by examining a composite measure in addition to specific suicidal behaviors—including ideation, previous attempts, and disclosure to others of desired or undesired intent to kill oneself—in a sample of 1,704 college students.

Although male young adults and undergraduate students specifically are more likely than female young adults/undergraduates to die by suicide [11,12], it remains unclear if female and male college students differ in other suicidal behaviors. Multiple studies have reported no sex differences in rates of suicidal behaviors including suicidal ideation and attempts [9,13–16]. Yet once again, many studies examining possible sex differences in suicidal behaviors among college students relied on either a single-item [9] or a composite suicidal behaviors score [7,13,15]. Although global measures are themselves important, they may obscure potential sex differences in more specific behaviors among college students. Some studies examining specific suicide-related behaviors in college students have found sex differences. For example, Brownson et al. [17] found undergraduate women to be slightly more likely than undergraduate men to report morbid thoughts in the past year, serious suicidal ideation in the past year, having made a suicide attempt in the past year, and disclosing the ideation to someone else. Wilcox et al. [2] found significantly higher rates of one-time ideation and a plan or attempt at any time in college, though not persistent ideation, among women as compared to men. Thus, while there is some indication that college women report more suicidal behaviors than college men, additional studies are needed.

In addition to potential sex differences, psychopathology is one of the most consistent correlates of college students' suicidal behaviors. Depression, anxiety, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are the most common mental health problems experienced by college students [18,19], and these mental health problems are themselves strongly intercorrelated [20,21]. Nonetheless, research efforts to examine psychopathology correlates of suicidal behaviors in college students have almost universally examined internalizing symptoms or ADHD in isolation. For instance, depression is a consistent and strong predictor of suicidal behaviors in college students, and so some studies have focused solely on depression and not simultaneously considered other psychopathologies [9,22,23]. Other studies have considered depression in tandem with anxiety [14,18] or ADHD [8,24]. However, without considering multiple psychopathology dimensions simultaneously, it remains unclear which, if any, psychopathologies relate to suicidal behaviors above and beyond depressive symptoms, or if symptoms differentially relate to specific suicidal behaviors. Studies are needed that simultaneously evaluate multiple psychopathologies in a sample large enough to uncover effects beyond depression.

One psychopathology dimension that has garnered recent research attention is sluggish cognitive tempo (SCT), a set of symptoms characterized by excessive daydreaming, mental fogging, mind blanking, and slowed behavior [25–28]. SCT symptoms are strongly related to, but distinct from, both ADHD and depression, and also associated with greater emotion dysregulation and loneliness as well as lower self-esteem [25–28]. No study to date has

examined the association between SCT and suicidal behaviors in adults, though one recent study in school-aged children found SCT to be significantly associated with both parent- and child-rated suicidal behaviors above and beyond depression, anxiety, and loneliness [29]. It is important to examine whether SCT is uniquely associated with suicidal behaviors in college students, particularly as SCT symptoms are not currently assessed as part of any prevention, screening, or intervention efforts targeting suicide risk in college students. If, indeed, SCT symptoms are associated with college students' suicidal behaviors, these symptoms may be important for advancing such efforts.

The present study had three objectives. First, we described rates of global and specific suicidal behaviors in a sample of college students from two universities, including rates of college students meeting established cutoff criteria for suicide risk. Second, we examined sex differences in suicidal behaviors, and we tentatively hypothesized that women would generally demonstrate more suicidal behaviors than men, particularly in the domains of suicidal ideation and disclosure of ideation to others [2,17]. Third, we examined the unique association of SCT symptoms in relation to global and specific suicidal behaviors after controlling for symptoms of depression, anxiety, and ADHD. We included separate inattentive (ADHD-IN) and hyperactive-impulsive (ADHD-HI) dimensions, though previous research has found both ADHD dimensions to similarly relate to college students' suicidal behaviors [24]. We hypothesized that neither ADHD dimension would remain significantly associated with suicidal behaviors above and beyond internalizing symptoms [30], that depression would be the strongest psychopathology correlate of suicidal behaviors [9,14,23], and that SCT symptoms would demonstrate a unique association with suicidal behaviors above and beyond other psychopathologies including depression [29].

Methods

Participants

Participants were 1,704 college students enrolled in two public universities in the Midwest United States. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 29 years. There were 1,099 women, 597 men, and 6 participants who indicated their sex as other. The majority (81.7%, $n = 1,388$) of participants self-identified as white; the remaining participants self-identified as Asian/Asian American (7.7%, $n = 131$), black/African-American (6.1%, $n = 103$), Biracial/Multiracial (4.0%, $n = 68$), American Indian/Alaska Native (0.4%, $n = 6$), or Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander (0.1%, $n = 2$). Seventy-three participants (4.3%) self-identified as Hispanic/Latino. The sex, race, and ethnicity items were not completed by 2, 6, and 2 participants, respectively. Most participants (63.4%) were in their first year of college; the remaining participants were in their second (23.6%), third (8.7%), fourth (4.0%), or other (0.2%) year of college. Descriptive information regarding sex and race/ethnicity for the two universities (general enrollment as well as study enrollment) is provided in Appendix A (Table A1).

Procedures

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at each institution. Students enrolled in introductory psychology (general education) courses were able to participate in a research study (or studies) to fulfill a course requirement (or, alternatively, to complete an alternative assignment such as a brief paper).

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