BULLYING, CYBER BULLYING AND SUICIDE: A CRISIS ON CAMPUS?

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ABSTRACT

OBJECTIVE

In the last decade, bullying, cyber bullying, and suicide among adolescents has emerged as a global public health problem. A growing body of literature indicates that both bullying and cyber bullying are strong risk factors for suicidal ideation, attempts, and completed suicides in adolescents. Taking this into account, there is a need to extend this line of inquiry to Higher Education Institutions (HEI). It is assumed that risk of suicidal ideation, attempts and completed suicides can be reduced by minimizing the exposure to bullying and cyber bullying. Recommendations and suggestions are provided for Higher Education Institutions employees, mental health professionals, parents and educators to address bullying, cyber bullying and suicide.

KEY WORDS

Bullying, Cyber bullying, Suicide, Higher Education.

The national and international literature has shown an increase in levels of suicidal ideation and suicide rates among HEI students over the last decade.[1-4] Among the factors associated with the risk of suicidal behavior is the experience of bullying.[5] Bullying includes a subset of aggression, distinguished by the criteria of repetition and imbalance of power.[6]

The aim was to provide a brief review of the scientific literature concerning the potential link between bullying, cyber bullying and suicide; it is further extended to provide suggestions and recommendations to address bullying, cyber bullying and suicide within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

A review of studies showed a strong relationship between being bullied and suicidal ideation.[7] In addition, victims of bullying consistently display high levels of emotional distress and mental health problems including sadness, withdrawal and loneliness,[8] as well as feelings of humiliation, anxiety and depression.9 Although being bullied is a strong risk factor for suicidal behavior, other risk factors such as psychiatric disturbances and lack of social support may contribute.[10]

Over the last decade, the nature of bullying, harassment and peer aggression has been extended to cyberspace with the rapid development of Internet and Communication Technology (ICT). HEI students rely heavily on ICT to provide them with the latest information and to collaborate through email, messengers, and video calls. Although ICT provides numerous benefits to students, it can also be to their detriment.

Aggression and mistreatment perpetrated with ICT is usually called cyberbullying[11,12]: "… aggressive intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself"[11] and "willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices."[12] Typically, this can involve sending derogatory and intimidating messages, posting online intimate photos/videos, revenge porn and sensitive information about someone. There have been many reported cases of suicide as a response to online harassment and threats or cyberbullying. The case of the Canadian teenager Amanda Todd was one of the first to gain notoriety.[13]

A similar case is reported in Pakistan in which a female, award-winning student was cyberbullied and blackmailed by a man who had befriended her on Face book. Her experience of cyber victimization ultimately lead her to commit a suicide[14]. This phenomenon has been labelled "cyberbullicide": "suicide indirectly or directly influenced by the experiences with online bullying."[15] Researchers have claimed that there are certain features of cyber bullying that can make it more distressing for victims than traditional bullying. First, the permanence of digital messages and pictures in comparison to verbal statements; Second, online content can often readily go viral and can be viewed by a large audience. Third, perpetrator often uses a pseudo identity making it difficult to recognize the

offender. Fourth, it is very difficult to escape from cyber bullying because there no geographical boundaries involved and the offender has potential access to the victim "24/7".[15]

Although there now exists a significant literature on the association of being a victim of traditional bullying and suicidal behavior,[5] there has been less research on being a victim of cyber bullying and suicidal behavior[15,16] and this work has typically been conducted among school-aged samples. Research on school-aged students has shown that the experience of cyber bullying is linked with a broad range of mental health problems including emotional distress, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation/attempts.[16] Further, a study on high school students revealed that depression significantly moderated the association between cyber victimization and suicidal attempts but only for females.[17] Moreover, another study investigated the involvement of cyber bullying to predict suicidal ideation over and above the role of traditional forms of bullying among adolescents. Results revealed that experiences of cyber bullying and perpetration of cyber bullying had significantly predicted suicidal ideation but physical and social bullying predicted no effect on the outcome variable.[18] In contrast, comparatively little research has examined the association between bullying, cyber bullying and suicide among students in HEIs. This shortfall is somewhat surprising given the literature which has shown an increase in levels of suicidal ideation and suicide rates among HEI students over the last decade.[4] Cyber bullying may be implicated in this increase. Therefore, it is essential to extend this line of inquiry to address the issue of cyber bullying and how such experiences may be associated with suicidal behavior in students during higher studies.

Within Pakistani culture, where "family honor" is often tied to the conduct of woman, the reported case of a female student revealed the extreme vulnerability of women for cyber victimization and how such experience can lead to suicidal behavior.[14] Females sometimes take intimate photos and videos of themselves for personal use. However, often illegal distribution and editing of such personal pictures and videos with derogatory and offensive titles and disparaging comments can become a serious problem not only for that woman but also for the whole family.

The literature has revealed that bullying, cyber bullying and suicide share a few common risk and protective factors.[18] Thus, integrating bullying, cyber bullying and suicide-related prevention and intervention efforts by targeting the most common risk and protective factors could be a useful strategy.

Effective prevention plans should incorporate assessment and screening. Assessment of the risk of bullying and suicidal tendencies requires professional skill and expertise that is usually undertaken by counselors, mental health professionals and other experts. However, academic and non-academic staff members can be trained in the identification of the most obvious warning symptoms of depression and factors related to bullying and suicidal behavior, as well as appropriate responses, sources of guidance and referral. Besides this, other staff members that deal with students, for example, library, departmental support, and laboratory staff should also be included in such training.

Raising general awareness about bullying and cyber bullying as part of the enhancement of mental well-being initiatives should be undertaken at the institutional level, especially targeting the students. Friends and roommates of students may be the first to notice warning signs such as becomes socially withdrawn, aggressive, drug use, anxious, clingy, depressed, self-harming thoughts, suddenly intervals in using the computer or electronic devices and seems nervous or anxious when get an email, text or instant message etc.

There is a need to make them aware of the most appropriate action to take, and how and where they can turn for advice. Students should be provided with an orientation at induction about the range of guidance services and support available to them on campus.

HEIs can develop specific web pages with links to helpful organizations that are working for the prevention of bullying, cyber bullying and suicide. Awareness programs may include guidance leaflets covering topics such as nature, impact and consequences of bullying, cyber bullying, suicidal thinking, self-help for being victimized and self-harming behaviors. Awareness may cover specific health promotion initiatives and promoting and celebrating mental health days on campus.

Mental health providers and educational counselors should keep themselves receptive to the associations of bullying, cyber bullying and suicide with depression, anxiety, stress and social withdrawal in order to assess and intervene accordingly. They should be involved in community-based outreach efforts to provide information sessions and discussions to students, parents and educators. Because of the wide range of negative mental health and psychosocial consequences of bullying and cyber bullying, which in extreme situations can even lead to suicide, counselors should arrange workshops to provide awareness about the psychological consequences of cyber bullying. In addition, awareness should be promoted for safe use of internet and modern technological devices within institutions of higher education. Moreover, preventive efforts can be implemented with the collaboration of counseling centers, student service departments and departments of psychology and behavioral sciences.[19]

Family members should maintain nurturing relationships through open conversations and healthy dialogue at home. Cohesive and supportive family relationships always work as a strong protective factor against suicidal thoughts. Family members should set time on a regular basis to connect with each other, share life events, to discuss problems, and in this way monitor signs of possible problems e.g., signs of emotional disturbance such as lack of sleep or excessive sleep, neglected hygiene, unkempt personal appearance, outbursts of anger and social isolation. Changes in behavior patterns should be noticed, explored and discussed positively in a supportive family.

Educators should develop open and inviting discussions during tutorials. They should encourage students to learn problem-solving skills, strategies for conflict resolutions and pro-social skills. Promoting a supportive and positive campus climate is a helpful strategy for reducing and preventing bullying and suicide. Campus culture should foster care, respect and feelings of inclusiveness. Opportunities should be provided to students to make healthy connections that can serve as social support.

In conclusion, in order to address bullying, cyber bullying and suicide,

an integrative approach should be used that encompasses cultural, educational and public health aspects of effective prevention and intervention efforts. Perhaps by such activity, there will be less suicides attributable to bullying or cyber bullying in Pakistan and elsewhere.

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