

Title

Suicide Risk and Psychological Vulnerability in University Students Accessing Counselling: Preliminary Data from the PROBEN Project

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Abstract

Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increase in psychological distress among university students, with particular concern regarding suicide risk. The PROBEN project, promoted by the University of Milano-Bicocca in partnership with seven other universities in Lombardy, was funded by the Ministry of University and Research (MUR). Among its objectives, the project aims to explore risk and protective factors for psychological well-being in students accessing university counselling services. This contribution presents preliminary data collected at the University of Milano-Bicocca, focusing on suicide risk and associated psychological vulnerabilities.

Methods

A total of 51 university students (aged 19–31 years, $M = 22.67$, $SD = 2.72$) who sought support from the psychological counselling service at the University of Milano-Bicocca participated in the study. Before starting the counselling sessions, students completed self-report questionnaires assessing psychological well-being (CORE-OM), academic sense of belonging (SAES), emotion regulation (DERS-SF), mentalization (RFQ-8), coping strategies (Brief COPE), potentially dysfunctional behaviors (BAQ), substance use (WHO-ASSIST, items 1–2), suicidal ideation (items from the C-SSRS), and self-injury (ad hoc questionnaire). Demographic and clinical history data were also collected. The practitioners involved ($N = 17$), all licensed psychologists, completed a questionnaire on training, clinical orientation, and intervention modalities.

Results

A total of 29.4% of students reported passive suicidal ideation in their lifetime, and 17.6% also within the past month. Active ideation was reported by 17.6% (5.9% recently), 9.8% reported non-suicidal self-injury, and 2.0% had attempted suicide in their life. The average score on the CORE-OM "Risk" domain was 1.25 (SD = 0.41), indicating mild clinical risk. Overall psychological well-being appeared compromised (CORE Total: $M = 2.50$; $SD = 0.65$). The RFQ-8 showed mild tendencies toward hypermentalization ($M = 1.02$) and less pronounced tendencies toward hypomentalization ($M = 0.65$). The DERS-SF indicated moderate emotional difficulties (Total $M = 46.29$), particularly in clarity, strategies, and acceptance. The most frequent coping strategies were self-blame ($M = 3.02$) and planning ($M = 2.84$), while avoidance was less used ($M = 1.86$). The most prevalent behaviors on the BAQ were smartphone use ($M = 15.55$), Internet use ($M = 15.94$), binge eating, and work. Academic sense of belonging appeared strong in persistence, but more fragile in peer and faculty relationships.

Conclusions

Preliminary data from the Bicocca subsample highlight suicide risk and mild to moderate psychological vulnerability in some students accessing counselling services. Difficulties in emotion regulation, mentalization, and coping suggest the urgency of timely, targeted psychological interventions in academic settings. Further development of the PROBEN project—through its multicenter design and pre-post data—will support predictive analyses and the creation of evidence-based preventive protocols to promote student mental health.