Chapter 9

THE INTERNET AND SUICIDE

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ABSTRACT

In a world where information, entertainment, and socialization are all available with just a couple clicks on a pocket-sized phone, teens are more connected than ever to all that the internet has to offer. To most, this access is a beneficial tool that is used in a positive way in daily life, but there is a concerning dark side of the internet that allows unfiltered, negative information to be placed in the hands of individuals of all ages. Due to this mostly uncensored access, there has been an explosion of websites dealing with suicide, which is a growing concern in today’s youth. It is estimated that there are over 100,000 websites related to suicide that can be accessed through basic search engines. This chapter explores the pros and cons of the internet with regard to adolescent suicide.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the internet has become more accessible and affordable throughout the world (1, 2). Not only is the internet great at disseminating useful information, it also has the ability, through social media and various forums, to allow individuals to express themselves anonymously (1). This form of self-expression can be an outlet for stress and can boost self-esteem for those who have difficulties with personal or social interactions (3). The internet has allowed those suffering from depression a place to discuss and explore their thoughts behind closed doors. Adolescents that are the victims of bullying or social exclusion often will use the Internet as a coping mechanism to help them deal with their daily stressors (3).

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In attempts to help those with mental health issues there are many websites that teenagers can access that provide contact information and support services to assist those in need (4). Those who suffer from various mental disorders and social isolation can often explore positive avenues for treatment based on what they feel will best suit their needs (3). In light of the increasing prevalence of teen suicide, there now are an increased number of websites to promote overall self-esteem and serve as a positive outlet for those seeking reassurance and a sense of belonging.

INTERNET CONS

In direct contrast, the internet can be a very negative influence on those who access its sites. Numerous studies support the idea that the internet actually increases suicidal ideation in those searching for related information (2). There is a plethora of pro-suicide websites that promote taking one’s own life, detail the most effective routes to do so, and encourage individuals to join suicide pacts to commit mass acts with others that they connect with online (5). These internet “suicide pacts” have not been studied a great deal at this time, but it is thought that those who actually attempt or commit suicide as a result of these agreements represent only a small number of suicides in general (1). Studies have shown, especially with regards to adolescents, that the more time spent on the internet is directly correlated with increased self-harm and suicidal ideation (2). Depending on the world region where the Internet search is being performed, it has been found that different cultures may be exposed to different information with respect to suicide-related content, making it more personal to the population and therefore more concerning (4).

INTERNET ADDICTION

Due to having an immature and pleasure seeking brain, adolescents are at high risk for Internet addiction, also known as Pathological Internet Use (PIU) (6). After the inclusion of PIU in the DSM-V, Internet addiction has drawn the attention of many that care for the teenage population (3). Internet addiction is generally defined as spending an excessive amount of time online that results in an interference with daily activities, school, jobs, and relationships (7). A screening tool, titled Young’s Diagnostic Questionnaire for Internet Addiction (YDQ), was developed based on the clinical parameters of gambling addiction to help identify those with concerns for PIU (3). The Internet is excellent at capturing the adolescent mind with rapid movements and constant stimulation (6). PIU appears to have an overall negative effect on an individual’s well-being with regards to cognition, emotion, and social functioning, but it is unclear of the cause and effect correlation between PIU and mental illness (3). Moderate or severe Internet addiction has been associated with increased rates of self-harm and depression (2). Also, studies have shown that Internet addiction is significantly linked to suicidal behaviors (8).
CYBERBULLYING

Cyberbullying, also known as online harassment, is a common form of abuse in the adolescent population. Cyberbullying, like traditional bullying, both involve the exchange of hurtful words or threats from one person to another (7). The main difference in the two forms of bullying is that cyberbullying allows the bully to remain somewhat anonymous, lacks supervision from adults, and the victim is typically available at all times, which creates a much more hurtful environment for the victims and allows the bullies to be much more aggressive (9). Cyberbullying also allows perpetrators to disseminate information to a large audience within seconds, creating a much greater impact on the victim as compared to traditional bullying (10). Males seem to be at greater risk of being the victim of traditional bullying, but studies suggest females are more susceptible to online bullying (7). Research shows that around 10-20% of adolescents currently experience bullying or bully others through electronic means (11).

The effects of cyberbullying can be profound on the teenage population. One study concluded that victims overall had lower school performance and a more negative school experience than those who were not bullied (10). Another study revealed self-harm was more prevalent in those who were bullied online (2). Also noted, the rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts were greater in both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying (12). Cyberbullying seems to create great psychosocial distress through depression, anxiety, and social isolation in the adolescent population (13).

SUICIDE PACTS

Internet suicide pacts are another negative trend that has developed over the past decade. This trend, also known as “net suicides” or “cybersuicides,” are on the rise among today’s youth. Suicide pacts are defined as two or more people who have agreed upon a certain time and place to commit suicide together (14). The difference between an online suicide pact and a more traditional type pact is that the parties involved are complete strangers (15). Individuals involved in online suicide pacts will find one another in chat rooms or forums related to depression and suicide. Typically, these forums attract vulnerable individuals who feel socially isolated and are looking for an anonymous outlet for self-expression (3). There have been numerous documented suicides around the world that were known to be the result of an Internet suicide pact, but it is thought that the overall numbers may be higher than documented due to the difficult nature in tracking online activity.

INTERVENTIONS

The Internet is a powerful tool that raises concern when used by the vulnerable adolescent population. It is important that those dealing with teenagers, including parents, school officials, and healthcare providers, remain current on what is available online. Due to the ease of access today, monitoring Internet activity and restricting the viewing of certain content is not always realistic. It is important to have open conversations with adolescents on a regular
basis about their Internet viewing, including voicing concerns for pro-suicide websites and other negative material. It is also beneficial to direct teenagers to positive, preventive sites that can offer therapeutic resources (5).

Internet policing is an emerging topic with regards to pro-suicide websites and the increased prevalence of suicide pacts. Blocking or removing these sites from the Internet is virtually impossible. It is also very hard to enforce any regulations on Internet based material due to having no united jurisdiction. Many countries have dedicated departments to fight various Internet based crimes, but Japan and Korea are two countries that have designated specific “web-based police officers” to help monitor suicide websites, attempt to intervene when suicide pacts are being formed, and to disseminate positive information with helpful resources (1).

CONCLUSION

Today’s adolescent population is facing constantly evolving challenges that generations prior have not had to face, mostly due to advanced technology. Internet access in all parts of the world is only going to continue to improve. It is impossible to shield teenagers from all the evils that come along with this vast portal of information, but knowing what dangers are present and maintaining open communication regarding these dangers are vital to the overall health and safety of our youth. It is only hoped that the Internet of the future will become a more positive, supportive learning and entertaining environment for the adolescent population.

REFERENCES

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