Comparing Risk and Protective Factors for Suicidal Behavior Among College Students with Disabilities

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BACKGROUND
- There is little research on risk and protective factors for suicide in individuals with different types of disabilities.
- Those with hidden disabilities may experience unique challenges that could increase their suicide risk (Pederson, 2020).
- The Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) model emphasizes factors such as perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and attitudes towards oneself as critical to increasing risk for suicidal ideation. (O’Connor & Kirtley, 2018). The current study aims to evaluate the applicability of this theory to those with disabilities.
- Because research shows that social support (Hollingsworth et al., 2017), and resilience (Sher, 2019) are protective, we will include those variables to expand the focus on protective factors.
- Among youth, school involvement and sense of belonging have also been found to protect against suicidal thinking and behaviors (Janir et al., 2020), along with having access to and satisfaction with mental health services (Eisenberg et al., 2007).
- The current study aims to investigate what risk and protective factors have the greatest influence on suicidal thinking among students with hidden disabilities, and how these groups compare to students with physical disabilities.

HYPOTHESIS
We hypothesized that people with hidden physical, psychiatric, and learning disabilities would differ in levels of suicidality compared to those with visible disabilities and that different factors would predict suicidality.

METHODS
Participants (Max = 22.4, SD = 5.8yrs, 64.5% female, 89.3% white) were recruited from five UW system disability departments and completed an anonymous online survey. Constructs measured:
- Belongingness
- Self-esteem
- Social support
- Resilience
- Suicidality
- Satisfaction with disability services

Participants were grouped into hidden, physical, and hidden + physical disability groups for analyses.

Analyses:
- a) One-way ANOVA with Bonferroni group comparisons
- b) Three linear regression analyses; one for each group

RESULTS
Post hoc analyses showed that the hidden and combo groups significantly differed from each other on many variables, but not from the physical disability group which fell between them.

All three regression models were significant and explained between 50-55% of variance. Among those with hidden disabilities, burdensomeness, self-esteem, and quality of disability services were predictive of suicidality. In those with physical disabilities, self-esteem and quality of disability services were predictors. Within the combo group, burdensomeness and resilience were significant.

DISCUSSION
- These results highlight the importance of tailoring prevention strategies to the unique needs of each disability group.
- Post-hoc analyses supported our hypothesis; factors most strongly associated with suicidal behavior significantly differed between the three groups.
- The hidden and combo groups had the greatest difference between each other, while the physical group fell between them.
- Perceived quality of disability services had a protective relationship with suicidality within two groups.
  - Access to quality disability services and accommodations may help reduce suicidality.
  - Result is consistent with past research suggesting that access to quality support services can reduce the risk of suicidal behavior.
- Also consistent with previous studies were our findings that resilience served as a protective factor against suicidal behavior among students with a combination of hidden and physical disabilities.
  - Only in the combo group and not those with exclusively hidden or physical disabilities.
  - May be because of the additional challenges that come with having multiple disabilities and the need for resilience to overcome these challenges.
- Interestingly, self-esteem did not play a significant role in suicidal behavior in the combo group as it did in the hidden and physical groups.
  - May be that this has some connection to resilience, but further research would be needed.
- Finally, burdensomeness was predictive of suicidal behavior in hidden and combo groups, but not in the physical group.
  - This may be because of the greater degree of understanding and acceptance of physical disabilities in the general population, which may allay feelings of burdensomeness within this group.
- Findings highlight the unique challenges that individuals with different types of disabilities face, show that it is important to tailor support services to students’ unique needs rather than to one collective disability group.
- It is important that schools provide accessible services to a diverse array of students to reduce mental health emergencies. Identifying unique factors related to suicide risk for those with disabilities is a first step to inform preventive interventions.

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