

Mitigating suicidal ideation in tertiary education students: The strength of mental health and social support

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The alarming rise in suicide rates among young adults, particularly in Malaysia, highlights the critical need to understand the factors contributing to suicidal ideation. This study investigates both risk factors (depression, anxiety, stress and pessimism) and protective factors (optimism and social support) to elucidate their impact on suicidal thoughts among tertiary education students in Malaysia. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted using online surveys, involving 547 Malaysian tertiary education students aged 18-24 years ($M = 21.23$, $SD = 1.82$). Of the total sample, 280 (51.2%) participants reported no suicidal ideation, while 267 (48.8%) reported experiencing suicidal thoughts. **Results:** Using logistic regression, we found that students reporting suicidal ideation exhibited significantly higher levels of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and pessimism, coupled with lower levels of social support compared to their non-suicidal peers. Social support emerged as the most influential protective factor, while pessimism was the most significant risk factor. Surprisingly, stress and optimism did not significantly predict suicidal ideation in the regression analysis. **Conclusion:** Our findings highlight the crucial role of social support in safeguarding students' mental well-being and the detrimental impact of pessimism on suicidal ideation. The non-significance of stress and optimism suggests that interventions might be more effective when focused on enhancing social support networks and addressing pessimistic thought patterns, rather than solely targeting stress reduction or optimism enhancement. Educational institutions and mental health professionals should prioritize strategies that strengthen social connections and provide resources for managing depressive symptoms, anxiety, and pessimistic thinking. By concentrating on these key factors identified in the study, we can develop targeted and potentially more effective approaches to reduce the prevalence of suicidal ideation in tertiary education settings.