

## Counsellors' Perceived Causes and strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers

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### Abstract

This study is carried out in Anambra state and it adopted the descriptive survey design. Two research questions guided the study. The sample size of the study comprised of 205 counsellors who are willing to participate in the study and they are drawn through accidental sampling techniques at their areas of meetings. The instrument used for data collection is the counsellors' perceived causes and strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers questionnaire (CSPCASFRSTASSTSQ). The reliability of the instrument coefficient value of 0.70 is established. On the spot administration is used in administering the instrument to ensure 100% return. The data collected in the study is analyzed using the arithmetic mean. The decision rule is that any of the response item for which the mean score is 2.5 and above is taken to mean that the factor exists while any response item for which the mean score is below 2.5 is taken as not being in existence. The study revealed that the causes of suicidal thoughts among other things include: lack of parental love and care, bullying among peers, substance over use, failures in examinations, sexual abuse and loneliness as the causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers as perceived by the counsellors. The study also revealed that the counsellors' perceived strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among other things are : help them realize reasons to live and future goals, giving them academic support on how to succeed, teaching them the use of grounding techniques, learning the warning signs of suicidal thoughts as a starting point and offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for support as strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers. The researchers also recommended that government should ensure that every secondary school will have a professional counsellors handling secondary school students' problems early enough before such escalates and also, school counsellors should be teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships for the betterment of all in the family during Parents' Teachers Association meetings.

**Key words:** counsellors, causes, strategies, suicidal thoughts and teenagers

### Introduction

Human beings has different stages of development. The common stages are known as childhood, teenage or adolescent and adult hood. The most troublesome and fragile stage seems to be the teenage stage. The definition of teenagers in terms of strict age ranges is rather arbitrary and varies by country and over time (Skerrett, Barker and De-Leo (2012). For Chibuko (2019), teenagers are those people that are undergoing transition from childhood to adult stage and are within the age bracket of 13 to 19 years. They are in between the childhood and adulthood. These youngsters are confronted with real life concerns almost on a daily basis because they are in the most awkward growth stage of their lives. These young people are by nature vulnerable to mental health problems, especially during the years of adolescence (Orbach 2006). This stage of life is often characterized by movement, changes and transitions from one state into another in different domains simultaneously. For an example, these youngsters have to make decisions about important concrete directions in life, such as school, living situation, peer group, parental relationship, career to mention a few. They also address their new challenges in order to build their own identity, develop self-esteem, acquire independence and responsibility, and maintain intimate relationships and so on. Also, their parents, relatives and peers challenged them with high expectations which may be too overwhelming on them which can make some them to see themselves on a cross roads. Im, Oh and Suk (2017) opine that these type of situations can inevitably provoke a certain degree of helplessness, insecurity, stress and a sense of losing control among some of them.

This stage seems to be a pressure time which can make some of them to feel that they are being failures and also being misunderstood. And due to the fact that teenagers are too tender to handle such pressures or stresses, some of them may resort to taking unacceptable decisions which at times can lead to having suicidal thoughts which at times may lead to committing suicide.

Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2015), opine that suicide is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 35 and the second leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 14. Death is inevitable but the worst of it all is when one kills himself which is called suicide. Suicide is death caused by injuring oneself with the intent to die. Suicidal thought comes before the actual suicide. Suicidal thoughts can be refer to as the intentions, plans and attempts to bring one's life to an end without wasting time. Kerkhof (2014), sees suicidal thoughts as a deliberate act intended to end one's life in order to escape unbearable suffering or to help change adverse conditions of living. Uddin, Burton, Maple, Khan and Khan (2019) opine that suicidal thoughts are common among teenagers and it appears to be a neglected hidden social vice that exists among young people within the environment and it needs proper attention from the professional counsellors. Epidemiological studies assert that lifetime prevalence of suicidal attempts among high school students ranges from 3.5 to 9.0 percent (Andrews and Lewinsohn, 2012). Suicidal thoughts is not pertinent to a particular region or country but it is a global issue. Worldwide, suicidal ideation or thought is seen as one of the two leading causes of death in adolescents in the 15–19-year-old age group (World Health Organization, 2014). For example, during 2008–09, an estimated 8.3 million persons aged 18 and over in the United States, or 3.7% of the U.S. population, are reported having suicidal thoughts in the previous year, while an estimated 2.2 million reported having made suicide plans in the previous year. In 2019, 12 million U.S. adults seriously thought about suicide, 3.5 million planned a suicide attempt, 1.4 million attempted suicide, and more than 47,500 died by suicide (Crosby and Beth 2011).

Suicidal thought is refer to as one's plans to take or end his life. Kerkhof, (2014) sees suicidal thought as any deliberate action and inaction intended to end one's life in order to escape unbearable suffering or to help change adverse conditions of living. Also, Miller, McLaughlin, Busso, Brueck, Peverill, & Sheridan (2018) define suicidal thought or ideation as thought about death, dying, plans for suicide, or desire for death. Furthermore, suicidal thoughts can be a sign of passing stress and also a sign that someone is planning a suicide attempt.

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Suicidal thoughts among young people is one of the main issues to address through counselling measures. Therefore it is important to determine the causes of suicidal thought and counselling ways for reducing the menace among youngsters. In recent decades, several population-based psychological autopsy studies of suicidal thoughts have been conducted, involving interviews with key informants and examination of records, as well as follow-up studies of people who have attempted suicide, revealing important information about the risk factors for the behaviours (Turecki and Brent 2016). Everyone agrees that numerous factors can contribute to suicidal thoughts and attempts among adolescents. Mental disorders are found to contribute between 47 and 74% of suicide risk (Shain 2016). Substance abuse, and more specifically alcohol misuse, is also strongly

associated with suicidal attempt (Turecki and Brent 2016). Morese and Longobardi (2020) assert that eating disorders, in particular anorexia nervosa has been identified as one of the causes of suicidal thoughts for young people. Also, Existing literature on suicidal ideation among adolescents relies on a broad range of determinants from professional or career problems to sense of isolation, abuse, and violence, from family problems to rejection, failure, breakups, school difficulties, family turmoil and , and financial loss (Patel, Ramasundarhettige, Vijayakumar, Thakur, Gajalakshmi and Gururaj (2012) and Valois, Zullig and Hunter (2013). They might also be unable to see that they can turn their lives around and therefore perceived that suicide is a permanent response, not a solution, to their problems (Picazo-Zappino 2014).

Furthermore on the causes of suicidal thoughts or ideation, recent study conducted on adolescent Suicidal Ideation by Malhi, Bell, Das and Outhred (2019), considering the impact of social exclusion as a facilitating factor for suicide. In their study, adolescents with high levels of anxiety were recruited and underwent the experimental condition of social exclusion. In the study they examined whether this kind of social interaction can modulate suicidal thoughts. The results of their research showed that adolescents with higher levels of anxiety reported greater suicidal ideation after experiencing social exclusion and different forms of physical abuse.

Furthermore, the rigid thinking process or black and white, totally good or totally bad, with little space for nuance and gradation in these young people is also being link to suicidal ideation (Valois, Zullig and Hunter 2013). This inability in problem solving and mood regulation often causes insecurity, low self-efficacy and self-esteem, but it can also lead to anger and aggressive behaviours, emotional crisis and suicidal crisis, especially in combination with perfectionist personalities (O'Connor and Pirkis 2016).

Still on the causes of suicidal thoughts, Rutter (2011) opines that there is empirical support that childhood adversities, such as low social support, sexual abuse, domestic violence and maternal depression influence the development of suicidal thoughts during adolescence. In addition. Oppong, Kugbey, Osafo, Quarshie and Sarfo (2017) carried a study on the prevalence and correlates of suicidal behaviours (ideation, plan and attempt) among adolescents in senior high schools in Ghana to explore the prevalence and risk and protective factors associated with suicide in Ghana. A nationwide Global School-based Student Health Survey data collected among senior high school adolescents in Ghana was used. The study identified that the prevalence of suicidal behaviours was 18.2%, 22.5% and 22.2% for suicidal ideation, suicidal plan and suicidal attempt respectively. In the final analysis, anxiety and loneliness, increases the odds of suicidal behaviours, even after controlling for other variables. Also, being bullied, physically attacked, involved in a physical fight and food insecurity remained risk factors for suicidal behaviours. Parental understanding of adolescents' problems and worries also remained a significant protective factor for all the indices of suicidal behaviours after adjusting for other variables.

Since suicidal ideation which leads to suicidal attempt is a serious public health problem that have long-lasting effects on individuals, families, and communities if not controlled. Something has to be done to reduce its rate among adolescents. In order to arrest this menace school counsellors who relate with teenagers on a daily basis should out of their expertise device strategies for preventing suicidal ideation/suicide among teenagers. Counsellors are known for providing vital information for their clients to enable them to acquire a complete understanding of the knowledge and information on their respective concerns and implement it in their lives for their betterment. Guidance and counselling is a specialized field which has a comprehensive range of activities and services, directed at supporting the troubled individuals to recognize themselves and others, environmental conditions and acquire the abilities to adjust accordingly. The teenagers are faced with many personal, academic, social and emotional problems which includes suicidal thoughts and if left unattended could lead to arrangement of unwanted behaviours. Therefore, guidance counsellors would assist the youngsters to overcome and regulate to a host of social and emotional tasks they are experiencing at home, society and at school. The good news is that suicide is preventable especially through the services of a guidance counsellor. Through counselling, the child would get assistance in a proper direction so that he will be well aware of what he wants to do and be in life which will ignite life expectations more than thinking of suicide. Some studies conducted worldwide have documented the positive effect of counseling on different behavioural problems of individuals (Carney & Hazler 2000 and Lussier 2004) which suggest that raising

awareness around suicide and devising suicide prevention strategies will go a long way in reducing the problem among teenagers.

C.D.C (2015) and Turecki and Brent (2016) suggested learning the warning signs as a starting point which will serve as a signal for any individual working with the young people, listening with compassion and offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for emotional support as strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts. However, the major warning signs for suicide ideation or thoughts include talking about killing or harming oneself, talking or writing a lot about death or dying, hopelessness and seeking out things that could be used in a suicide attempt, such as weapons and drugs. These signals are even more dangerous if the person has a mood disorder such as depression or bipolar disorder, suffers from alcohol dependence, has previously attempted suicide, or has a family history of suicide (WHO,2014).

Further, on the strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts, Carney and Hazler (2000), Morese and Longobardi (2020) and Shain (2016) opine that counsellors may help the victims relocate to a safer place that can enhance avoidance of acting on suicidal thoughts, getting rid of weapons around the vicinity through parents and guardians, use of medications, avoiding alcohol and other substance uses without moderation and teach them the use of grounding techniques. Examples of grounding techniques include going for a short walk, cuddling a pet, and 4-7-8 breathing are all examples of grounding techniques that can help one stay in the present during a moment of intense distress (CDC, 2015). Also, listening to music, savouring a favourite food or beverages and looking at photos or videos of loved people and animals can serve as strategies for reducing the problem (Rutter 2011). Furthermore, strengthening economic supports through strengthening household financial security and stabilizing housing, teaching coping and problem-solving skills. This teaching coping and problem solving skills may be achieved through giving support to social-emotional learning programs, teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships and supporting resilience through education programs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Suicide in teenagers/adolescents is a major global issue and it is increasing on a daily basis. Social media and newspapers carry the news here and there. It affects people of different backgrounds. No one knows whose child it can fall upon next. Such situations like lack of social support, sexual abuse, failure in exam, domestic violence and maternal depression to mention a few can inevitably provoke a certain degree of helplessness, insecurity, stress and a sense of losing control among some of them thereby opting for suicide as a safer solution to the problems. This phenomenon should not be over look because children who normally learn through observation may think that it is a way of solving problems of life and they will see it as a culture. Also, suicidal thoughts can lead to committing suicide which do have a long-lasting effects on the individuals, families, and communities at large. Therefore, it is to prevent such ugly situation that make the researchers embark on this study identify counsellors strategies for reducing suicidal /suicide among teenagers.

### **Research Questions**

The following two research questions guides the study:

1. What are the counsellors' perceived causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers?
2. What are the counsellors' perceived strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers?

### **Methodology**

The study is carried out in Anambra state and the descriptive survey design is adopted in this study. The descriptive survey is the one in which group of people or items is studied by collecting and analyzing data from only a few people or items considered to be representative of the entire group. Two research questions guided the study. The sample size of the study comprised of 205 counsellors who are willing to participate in the study who are drawn through accidental sampling techniques at their areas of meetings. The instrument used for data collection is a structured questionnaire on the counsellors' perceived causes and strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers. The instrument was validated by three experts. For the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach alpha reliability coefficient value of 0.70 is established which the researchers consider as good enough for the study. On the spot administration is used in administering the instrument to ensure 100% return. The data collected in the study is analyzed using the



arithmetic mean. The decision rule is that any of the response item for which the mean score is 2.5 and above is taken to mean that the factor exists while any response item for which the mean score is below 2.5 is taken as not being in existence.

## Results

The results are presented in tables according to the research questions and they are as follows:

Research question one: What are the counsellors' perceived causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers?

Table 1: Counsellors responses on perceived causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers.

S/N	Items	Mean	Decision
1.	feeling of depression informs suicidal thoughts	3.36	Accepted
2.	lack of parental love and care	3.15	Accepted
3.	Bullying among peers	3.44	Accepted
4.	Failed love relationship	3.48	Accepted
5.	Substance over use	3.45	Accepted
6.	Failure in examinations	3.60	Accepted
7.	Domestic violence	3.43	Accepted
8.	Low social support	3.45	Accepted
9.	Sexual abuse	3.61	Accepted
10.	Loneliness	3.44	Accepted

Data presented in Table 1 above indicates the mean scores on the causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers. The results reveal that guidance counsellors agreed to items 1 to 10 as causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers. The mean scores ranges from 3.15 to 3.61. The causes as perceived by the counsellors are as follows: feeling of depression, lack of parental love and care, bullying among peers, failed love relationship, substance over use, failure in examinations, domestic violence, low social support, sexual abuse and loneliness.

**Research Question 2:** What are the counselling strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers?

Table 2: Counsellors responses on perceived strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers.

S/N	Items	Mean	Decision
11.	Help them to realize reasons to live and future goals	3.44	Accepted
12.	Giving them academic support on how to succeed	3.70	Accepted
13.	Capital punishment is seen as a strategy	2.38	Not Accepted
14.	Teaching coping and problem-solving skills	3.54	Accepted
15.	Teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships	3.61	Accepted
16.	Teaching them the use of grounding techniques	3.60	Accepted
17.	Learning the warning signs as a starting point	3.70	Accepted
18.	Offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for support	3.50	Accepted

Data presented in Table 2 shows the mean of value on the counselling strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among teenage secondary school students. On a whole, the result revealed that guidance counsellors agreed to items 11 and 12, 14 to 18 and disagreed to item 13 raised on the counselling strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers. The items rated agreed had a mean score ranges from, 3.44 to 3.70. The item the counsellors rejected as a strategy for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers is the use of capital punishment which scored 2.38. Guidance Counsellors therefore, agreed that the following strategies can be used in reducing suicidal thoughts among teenagers: help them to realize reasons

to live and future goals, giving them academic support on how to succeed, teaching coping and problem-solving skills, teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships, teaching them the use of grounding techniques, learning the warning signs of suicidal thoughts as a starting point and offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for support while capital punishment is not a strategy,

## **Discussion.**

The major findings of the study are briefly discussed as follows. On the causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers, the study identified the following: feeling of depression, lack of parental love and care, bullying among peers, failed love relationship, substance over use, failure in examinations, domestic violence, low social support, sexual abuse and loneliness as perceived by the counsellors. These findings gave support to the findings of Oppong, Kugbey, Osafo, Quarshie and Sarfo (2017) who identified in Ghana that depression, loneliness, being bullied, and domestic violence remained risk factors for suicidal behaviours. Also the studies carried out by CDC 2015, O'Connor & Pirkis (2016) and Rutter (2011) also noted that lack of parental love and care, failed love relationship, substance over use and failure in examinations are among the causes of suicidal thoughts among adolescents.

Moreover, on the counsellors' perceived strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers, the study identified the following: help them to realize reasons to live and future goals, giving them academic support on how to succeed, teaching coping and problem-solving skills, teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships, teaching them the use of grounding techniques, learning the warning signs of suicidal thoughts as a starting point and offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for support. These findings collaborate with the findings of C.D.C (2015) and Turecki and Brent (2016) whose studies identified that teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships, teaching them the use of grounding techniques, learning the warning signs of suicidal thoughts as a starting point and offering guidance on ways to reach out to loved ones for support as some of the strategies for suicide control. Furthermore, some of the findings of this study supports the findings of Carney and Hazler (2000), Morese and Longobardi (2020) and Shain (2016) whose studies identified that helping them to realize reasons to live and future goals, giving them academic support, teaching coping and problem-solving skills as among the factors for eliminating suicidal thoughts among youngsters.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, it is expedient to deduce that the causes of suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers as perceived by counsellors include: feeling of depression, lack of parental love and care, bullying among peers, failed love relationship, substance over use, failure in examinations, domestic violence, low social support, sexual abuse and loneliness as perceived by the counsellors. On the other hand, the counsellors agreed that the strategies for reducing suicidal thoughts among secondary school teenagers include the following: feeling of depression, lack of parental love and care, bullying among peers, failed love relationship, substance over use, failure in examinations, domestic violence, low social support, sexual abuse and loneliness as perceived by the counsellors.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations were made by the researchers:

1. Government should ensure that every secondary school will have a professional counsellors handling secondary school students' problems early enough before such escalates.
2. School counsellors should be teaching parenting skills to improve family relationships for the betterment of all in the family during Parents' Teachers Association meetings.

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