Suicide Attempts and Long-Term Problems

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A study found that people who made one or more suicide attempts through age 24 displayed significantly more mental health, physical health, and social problems at age 38 regardless of sex, socioeconomic status, or psychiatric diagnosis (at the time of their attempts). The authors cautioned that this research does not assume “that suicide attempts are a cause of later poor health and social functioning” but say it provides evidence that “young suicide attempters may warrant long-term follow-up and supportive care in the years after their attempt(s).”

People with a history of suicide attempts were more likely to use mental health services, to seek help for psychiatric problems, to take psychiatric medication, and to need welfare than people without such a history. They were found to be at greater risk for the following problems:

- Poor mental health, including persistent major depression and substance abuse, non-suicidal self-injury, and further suicide attempts between ages 26-38
- Poor physical health, including risk factors for heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and systemic inflammation (which can damage the immune system and raise the risk of allergies, cancer, and other problems) as well as unintentional injuries and accelerated aging
- Harm toward others, including violent crimes, abusing an intimate partner, or having a child removed from the home by social services
- Social problems, including unemployment, victimization by an intimate partner, loneliness, and dissatisfaction with life

The authors pointed out that these problems take a toll on the lives of the attempt survivors and have costs for their families and intimate partners as well as for the health, welfare, and criminal justice systems. They emphasized that they did not assume that suicide attempts cause later problems, but suggested that such attempts may provide an “early warning signal” that can help identify young people in need of health, mental health, and social services.

The sample used in this study were 91 survivors of suicide attempts made through age 24, as well as 946 people who had not attempted suicide under the age of 25. All study participants were born in the province of Dunedin in New Zealand.


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