



Connectedness and Adolescents (Part 1)

February 27, 2015

News Type: Weekly Spark, Weekly Spark Research

The authors of a literature review have concluded that there is a significant association between social connectedness and protection against suicidal thoughts and behaviors among adolescents. This week, we will explore the authors' suggestions about how connectedness protects young people. In an upcoming issue of the *Weekly Spark*, we will explore the implications of these findings for suicide prevention.

The authors define connectedness as "the degree to which an individual (or group) possesses a subjective sense of emotional interrelatedness (belonging, caring, value, and trust) and a willingness to share with and seek resources from the individuals and communities in which he/she is socially or geographically embedded."

The authors suggest that connectedness helps protect adolescents against suicidal thoughts and behaviors in three ways.

1. Perceived social connectedness reduces the risk of suicide by enhancing a young person's internal resources. Research reveals that the perception of connectedness (i.e. what a young person believes about his or her connections to others) is a more powerful protective factor than objective connectedness (e.g. the number of people in a person's social network). Neurological evidence supports the finding that when people believe that they are connected to other people, their bodies increase the production of chemicals that contribute to positive emotions, increased sociability, better physical health, and an enhanced ability to regulate emotions and solve problems. In addition, young people who feel socially connected are more likely to seek help when under stress than young people who feel isolated.
2. Actual social connectedness reduces the risk of suicide by increasing a young person's external resources. Adolescents who are connected to others (especially caring adults) in their families, schools, and communities are more likely to disclose emotional distress to others or to have others notice their distress than are young people who are socially isolated. The potential that a young person will reveal his or her emotional distress to others and ask for help or that other people will notice a young person's distress and offer help increases with the density of a young person's social networks as well as the level of the young person's integration in those networks.
3. Social connections with people who hold positive norms also help buffer the risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors. Adolescents who associate with people who hold norms that support healthy coping and help-seeking and identify suicidal thoughts and behaviors as problems that require intervention are likely to adopt those attitudes. Adolescents who are socially isolated or whose peers hold unhealthy attitudes (e.g. that people should not ask for help or that problems cannot be solved) may face an increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

This summary is from: Whitlock, J., Wyman, P., and Moore, S. (2014). Connectedness and suicide prevention in adolescents: Pathways and implications. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 44(3): 246-272.

