

The Holiday-Suicide Link Is a Myth

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The widely held belief that suicides spike around the holidays is false, and the media may be partly to blame for fueling this ongoing misconception, according to the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC).

Since 2000, the APPC, based at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, has been tracking reports in the media about the notion that more people commit suicide during the end-of-year holidays than at other times during the year.

For the year 1999, they identified more than 60 news reports that ran during the holiday period stating that suicides do indeed spike during the holidays. These stories accounted for 77% of the stories that talked about suicide potentially being related to the holidays.

After efforts by the APPC to debunk this misconception, the number of such stories dropped, and stories debunking the myth grew in number, they report.

However, their latest look at stories that ran during the last holiday season (2011-2012) shows that the number is once again rising. The proportion of stories making the holiday-suicide link is "once again at the same high level as in 1999 (76%)," the APPC notes in a statement released this month.

"Truly a Myth"

The APPC also tracked daily suicide rates to determine whether they are higher during the holiday season. On the basis of official suicide deaths in the United States, the months of November, December, and January typically have the lowest daily rates of suicide in the year, they report.

"Despite what many believe, the holiday-suicide link is truly a myth," the APPC says. There is clearly a seasonal pattern to suicide rates, with rates highest usually in the spring and summer months.

"The return of the holiday-suicide connection may be related to the fact that the adult (ages 25+) suicide rate has increased in recent years in step with the great recession," noted APPC's Dan Romer, PhD, who has directed the study since its inception. "With more people affected by suicide, news stories about suicide may be more common over the holidays, bringing the myth back to our attention."

The APPC cautions that stories in the media that make suicide appear more common during the holidays may encourage vulnerable individuals to consider it. "Although we have no direct evidence for such an effect of the holiday myth, other evidence indicates that the media can influence vulnerable people to attempt suicide. This has led various public health agencies and organizations to encourage more accurate reporting about suicide by the news media (see www.reportingonsuicide.org)," the APPC said in a statement.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States. It is the second leading cause of death for people aged 15 to 25 years and the fourth leading cause of death for those between the ages of 25 and 44 years. It is now a greater cause of death than traffic fatalities.

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