

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

Emotion Regulation Difficulties, Youth–Adult Relationships, and Suicide Attempts Among High School Students in Underserved Communities

Pisani, A. R., Wyman, P. A., Petrova, M., Schmeelk-Cone, K., Goldston, D. B., Xia, Y., & Gould, M. S. (2013). Emotion regulation difficulties, youth–adult relationships, and suicide attempts among high school students in underserved communities. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42(6), 807-820. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9884-2

SUMMARY: Adolescence can be a particularly risky developmental period, especially for mental health problems and suicidal ideation. The impact of emotion regulation difficulties and trusting youth–adult relationships on past year suicide attempts was examined in a sample of high school students. Trusted adult relationships protected adolescents against suicide attempts, while emotion regulation difficulties and the absence of trusting adult relationships were predictive of past-year suicide attempts.

KEY FINDINGS:

- During the previous year, 8.6% of students reported at least one suicide attempt, with higher rates among females and Asian-American or Native American students.
- Emotion regulation difficulties and a lack of trusted adults at home or school were associated with past-year suicide attempts, even after controlling for depressive symptoms and demographic variables.
- Having trusted adult relationships, particularly with family members, was a protective factor, reducing the association between emotion regulation difficulties and suicide attempts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Help develop online modules to teach emotion regulation skills to youth struggling with suicidal ideation
- Facilitate support groups for children of Service members experiencing depression or suicidal ideation to prevent suicide attempts

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes on emotion regulation strategies to help young people effectively manage emotional reactions
- Develop structured social opportunities to enhance youth–adult relationships, particularly with family members and trusted adults at school

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Encourage the development of programs that teach children healthy emotion regulation strategies
- Continue to support parent education program for military parents to foster positive youth–adult relationships

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Data were drawn from baseline measures of a larger study of students from 30 high schools, and there was an 80% response rate.
- High school students completed online surveys during the 2010-2011 or 2011-2012 academic years evaluating past year suicide attempts, emotion regulation difficulties, depressive symptoms, and the perception of having trusted adults in several domains (i.e., family, school, community).
- The associations between emotion regulation difficulties, trusted relationships, and past year suicide attempts were examined, controlling for depression and other demographic variables.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample consisted of 7,978 students from 30 high schools (21 in New York, 9 in North Dakota), located primarily in non-metropolitan, low-income areas.
- The sample was primarily White (77%), with similar numbers of males and females.
- Most participants (93%) were 17 years of age and under.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants were primarily White high school students from non-metropolitan, low income areas, limiting generalizability to individuals with other demographic characteristics.
- The cross-sectional design prohibits drawing causal conclusions about the beneficial effects of enhanced emotion regulation and youth-adult relationships on suicide attempts.
- All outcome measures were based on retrospective self-report, which may threaten the validity of the conclusions.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Evaluate with a prospective, longitudinal study whether enhanced emotion regulation skills and youth-adult relationship confer protective effects on suicide attempts
- Seek to replicate these findings in a more diverse sample including demographically diverse adolescents, families with varying incomes, and metropolitan communities
- Examine the role of trusting friendships on adolescent emotion regulation, depression, and suicide attempts

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