Body Modification: Personal Art or Cry for Help?

BY BRUCE JANCIN
Denver Bureau

BROOMFIELD, COLO. — Body modification enthusiasts—individuals who undergo piercing, tattooing, and/or scarification—have a high rate of self-reported prior suicide attempts, David Lester, Ph.D., said at the annual conference of the American Association of Suicidology.

“Body modification is now becoming socially acceptable, maybe it’s something that high-risk adolescents could do to reduce their suicidality,” noted Dr. Lester, professor of psychology at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, Pomona.

“Of course, that’s a question that would require a longitudinal controlled study to properly answer,” he said.

A detailed survey of some 4,700 individuals who frequent a Web site devoted to hard-core body modification (www.bodyzine.com) concluded that only 34% had never considered suicide.

Thirty-nine percent of respondents indicated they had only contemplated suicide; 27% responded that they had made one or more attempts.

“That strikes me as high,” Dr. Lester said.

The median age of the survey respondents was 21 years. Eighty-eight percent were white, and roughly 45% were students.

Fifty-six percent of the body modification enthusiasts described themselves as heterosexual, 38% bisexual, and only 5% homosexual.

The type of body modification procedure individuals had undergone appeared to be related to their suicidality. For example, 27% of men and 46% of women with a pierced eyebrow—a relatively common form of body modification—reported previously attempting suicide, compared with 18% of men and 32% of women without an eyebrow piercing, he said.

Twenty-four percent of men with a tongue piercing reported previously attempting suicide, compared with 18% of those without this body modification. Given the very large sample size, that difference is highly statistically significant, Dr. Lester said.

Similarly, 37% of women with a pierced tongue reported prior deliberate self-harm, compared with 30% without a pierced tongue.

Altogether, of 25 possible anatomic sites for piercing, 9 were associated with increased suicidality.

Tattoos at nine specific anatomic sites were associated with an increase in self-reported suicide attempts.

“I would have predicted a lesser association with suicidality, given how much more popular tattoos have become since several decades ago when they were viewed as deviant,” Dr. Lester observed.

Some of the highest rates of suicidality were found among individuals who engaged in scarification. For example, 35% of men and 48% of women with scarification of the upper arm or shoulder reported one or more prior attempts at suicide, compared with 18% and 32%, respectively, without this particular body modification.

“Frequenters of a Web site devoted to body modification constitute a rather skewed survey population.”

As a sort of quick-and-dirty assessment of survey reliability, Dr. Lester checked to see if three well-established associations in the suicidology literature held true among respondents to the body modification survey.

Study Finds Lower Suicide Rates Not Due to Antidepressant Use

BY BRUCE JANCIN
Denver Bureau

BROOMFIELD, COLO. — The steep rise in antidepressant prescribing over the last several decades and the temporally associated decline in suicide rates in many Western countries are not causally related, Annette Erlangsen, Ph.D., said at the annual conference of the American Association of Suicidology.

Her 5-year study of the entire older population of Denmark—with accompanying data on individual prescriptions filled for antidepressants—showed that the vast bulk of the drop in the Danish suicide rate during the follow-up period involved the 96% of Danes not on an antidepressant.

“This is not a study about whether the use of SSRIs [selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors] or other types of antidepressants prevent suicides on an individual level,” said Dr. Erlangsen of Pennsylvania State University, University Park.

Nevertheless, her results show that the increased use of SSRIs has not had an impact on the change in the total suicide rate during the second part of life. “The rate did decline over time in antidepressant-treated patients, but only minimally—to a far lesser degree than in older Danes not on such therapy.”

The suicide rate in individuals on tricyclic antidepressants proved similar to that in SSRIs-treated patients. This was a surprising finding in light of the tricyclics’ notorious lethality in overdose.

The suicide rate actually rose slightly over time among Danes on atypical antidepressants. The most likely explanation is that these newer medications were largely reserved for patients who’d already failed to respond to other antidepressant classes.

Data Watch: Suicidal Ideation Is Down; Attempts Stay Level

Suicidal Ideation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>25%</td>
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<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Note: Data are based on a national sample of students in grades 9–12. Responses reflect the 12 months preceding the survey.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention