

University plans Internet network study

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Researchers at the University of South Florida say they plan to conduct a study on the psychosocial effects of Internet social networks on youth.

Ilene Berson, an associate professor at the school's Mental Health Institute, said she and colleagues at the school hoped to discover what effect networking sites like MySpace.com have on suicide rates, TechWeb reported Thursday.

"I've heard reports of young people who got into destructive dialogue online where they would dare each other to die, or share ways to complete the suicide successfully," Berson said. "Without doing the research we really have no idea, but it would be exciting to find that people who engage in social networking sites are less likely to commit suicide.

"We plan to submit the request for the project's federal funding in October to the National Institute of Mental Health," she said.

She said suicide is the third most common cause of death among youth ages 15 to 24, trumped only by accidents and homicides. She said her team hopes that understanding how young people communicate about suicide online could help build prevention initiatives.

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