

# Sociology professors asks 'Is teenage suicide contagious?'

April 11 2014

---

A paper on teenage suicide written by two assistant professors of sociology at the University of Memphis will be published in the field's flagship journal, the *American Sociological Review*, in April. "Are Suicidal Behaviors Contagious in Adolescence?," by Drs. Seth Abrutyn and Anna Mueller, also will be the subject of an upcoming podcast for the journal.

In the paper, the authors find that extremely personal behaviors, like suicide, are shaped by social influences. This study investigates what happens to teenagers who have no recorded suicidal history, but who recently have had a friend or family member attempt suicide, using data from the large, nationally representative Add Health archive.

The report finds that teenage boys and girls are vulnerable to developing new [suicidal thoughts](#) if a friend or family member recently has attempted suicide. Girls are more sensitive than boys, as they are affected by [suicidal behaviors](#) of both [family members](#) and friends. (Boys are not vulnerable to attempts by family members.) And while both boys and girls are affected by suicide, the impact lasts longer for girls and influences them in more ways. For example, girls are more likely to develop not only suicidal thoughts but also attempts.

"We believe, though more research needs to be done, that girls develop stronger emotional bonds, in adolescence especially, and thus are more susceptible to a close role model's attitudes or behaviors," said Abrutyn. "Past research confirms that girls and women are more vulnerable to a

friend or partner's opinion, and we know that [adolescent girls](#) tend to have fewer but more intimate relationships."

Their study also finds that the vulnerable period following the [suicide attempt](#) of a relative or friend may last a year or longer. Overall, the findings suggest that exposure to suicide attempts does contribute to the development of new suicidal thoughts and, in some cases, attempts.

This is important, because sociology has long argued that intimate social relationships – through the love and support that they provide – protect against suicide.

"We hope that teachers, parents, counselors, researchers and teenagers become aware of the profound impact being exposed to suicidal behavior has," Abrutyn said. "In addition, knowing that girls are more sensitive does not mean boys are not at risk, but that gender plays a role in how adolescents experience and cope with suicide attempts of people they care about."

The goal of the research is to prevent suicides, Abrutyn said. "We believe our findings provide important tools for communities and schools."

Since the 1950s, the adolescent [suicide](#) rate has tripled. Today it has stabilized, but it is still the second leading cause of death of those ages 15 to 24.

Mueller studies medical sociology and adolescence; Abrutyn is a general theorist interested in testing classical theories to identify how useful they are and advancing them so they are more effective in explaining social phenomena.

Said Abrutyn, "Suicide seemed like a great topic to both meld our

strengths while also exploring a serious social problem."

Provided by University of Memphis

Citation: Sociology professors asks 'Is teenage suicide contagious?' (2014, April 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2014-04-sociology-professors-teenage-suicide-contagious.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.