



# Suicide and the internet

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The internet can be used for great good, but it has a darker side. In this, the second of two articles looking at online safety (the first was in the Spring 2009 issue), I will explore concerns about so-called suicide chat rooms and websites and their possible link to a growing number of suicides by children and young people in the UK and around the world.

Suicide is a complex issue: an interaction of psychological, sociological, environmental and genetic factors. To suggest that the use of pro-active suicide websites and chat rooms is the sole cause of a suicide would, therefore, be naïve. Those who seek out these sites are often severely depressed and feeling hopeless, due to their unique personal circumstances. Undoubtedly there is an urgent need for greater access to good mental health care and emotional support for young people.

Nevertheless, there is a growing body of research that suggests that the use of suicide chat rooms and websites could be instrumental in helping young people make the final decision to end their lives. An article entitled 'When kids seek help on-line: internet chat rooms and suicide' by Katja Becker and Martin H Schmidt can be found at [www.questia.com](http://www.questia.com). [To access the full article you need to supply debit card details to set up a trial account that you can cancel within 72 hours without any charge.] The article warns: 'Evidence supporting existence of suicide contagion continues to amass from studies of suicide clusters and media impact. Suicide increases proportionally to the amount, duration and prominence of media coverage... The impact of suicide stories on subsequent completed suicides appears to be greatest among adolescents.'

Becker and Schmidt point out that chat rooms are typically used by adolescents and young adults: '... a group at highest risk for imitative suicidal behaviour.' They also highlight the fact that suicide forums and chat rooms differ in quality. Some advise site users to seek professional help and offer useful links to support organisations, and ban the promotion and announcement of suicides. Indeed, Becker and Schmidt argue that the ability to discuss the taboo topic of suicide without pressure can bring a sense of relief for some site users. Sadly, however, as

they observe, other suicide chat rooms 'place no restrictions on participants, their mean position being that suicide is a deliberate decision. They postulate an antipsychiatric attitude and give clear instructions about methods, locations and how to write suicide notes'.

Becker and Schmidt feel that peer pressure is a risk factor faced by young chat room users, especially as some suicide sites celebrate former chatters who have ended their lives. They also point out that people contemplating suicide often feel ambivalent, and this ambivalence may easily tip in the direction of death when faced with the peer pressure found in unregulated suicide chat rooms. Many might argue that peer pressure was instrumental in the death of 21-year-old Brandon Vedas from Arizona, who in 2003 killed himself on webcam. Many viewers 'egged' him on as he poisoned himself with a cocktail of prescription drugs. Similarly, in 2008, 19-year-old Abraham Biggs, also in the USA, was watched on a live video website by over 100 people, many of whom, police say, encouraged him to swallow the antidepressants that killed him. These tragedies not only show the pressure to which vulnerable internet users can be subjected but also expose the often voyeuristic nature of online life.

Pro-suicide websites have also been linked to a growing number of internet suicide pacts. There have been several cases in the UK and others in Norway, Korea, the USA, Australia and Japan. In several instances total strangers have formed pacts in chat rooms, meeting to end their lives together. Some sites allow users to advertise for a suicide partner. Sites also provide information about suicide methods in explicit detail. This information includes, for example, not only the most effective drugs to use, but even what to take to stop oneself vomiting once the lethal dose is swallowed.

## Government inaction

Many bereaved parents have been shocked to discover pro-suicide websites exist and believe they are strongly implicated in the deaths of their children. Many, such as Paul Kelly, whose 18-year-old son hung himself in 2001 after thanking the online friends he met in

a suicide chat room, feel that all such sites and chat rooms should be banned. In Australia, authorities now have legislation in place to impose heavy fines on individuals and companies involved in the online promotion of suicide. But, despite repeated calls to close these sites, in the UK the government has pointed out that making postings to suicide chat rooms is not breaking the law unless a direct link can be proven between a posting and a subsequent death. The Home Office considered amending the 1961 Suicide Act but eventually decided that such sites cannot be erased through legislation. The impression is that the UK government is concerned, but not sure what to do.

It is also somewhat disappointing to note that its independent review of child safety on the internet, conducted by television parenting guru Tanya Byron in 2008, makes no specific mention of the danger of these sites. Instead it focuses on general dangers and looks at online and video gaming in particular. The full report can be found at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview/). In chapter 4 of the review she makes the point that: 'There is no "silver bullet". Neither government nor industry can make the internet completely safe. The nature of the internet means there will always be risks, and children and parents need to understand how to manage the risks of the internet.' Although I agree with this statement, it seems to me that not enough is being done at present to raise awareness of specific online risks.

A UK charity, Papyrus, set up by bereaved parents to help prevent young suicides, is leading a campaign for change. The charity's website can be found at [www.papyrus-uk.org](http://www.papyrus-uk.org). A useful document for parents and carers, 'Action for Safety on the Internet', can be downloaded from the site, together with the organisation's Internet Safety Campaign objectives (go to News and scroll down). Among the wise suggestions for improvements is that the government should include mention of the dangers of the internet in its National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England, and on its website for parents. Papyrus would also

like the government to provide training courses for parents on internet safety. Papyrus feels strongly that the general public, the industry and the government currently lack awareness of the role of the internet in promoting suicide.

On a positive note however, thanks to parental pressure and governmental request, some service providers (they include Yahoo and AOL) and some search engine companies have agreed to reprioritise search results when the word 'suicide' is keyed in, so that a link to suicide help sites such as The Samaritans comes up on the list before links to pro-suicide chat rooms or websites.

Tam, Tang and Fernando, in an article entitled 'The internet and suicide: a double-edged tool' in the *European Journal of Internal Medicine* (volume 18, issue 6), make the point that the internet has a significant impact on assisting and promoting suicide. Yet, they also argue, it is also a 'powerful tool for recognition of the at-risk individual, for preventing suicide and supporting survivors' and for 'providing accessible self-help sites for suicidal persons and web-based prevention services, all of which are sadly under-utilised'.

Pro-suicide websites may never be banned – and many would argue that everybody has the right to use such sites and to end their life if they so wish. It is a complex issue with no easy solutions. What seems clear, however, is that at present we are failing to harness the internet's full potential to help those in despair and that young people in particular are vulnerable to manipulation and pressure when they visit un-moderated sites and receive advice from people who are themselves often severely depressed. In the course of writing this article I have read reports of the suicides of many children and young people worldwide that the media have linked in some way to suicide websites, chat rooms and even regular social networking sites. Parents, carers and professionals working with children and young people need to realise and acknowledge the powerful influence of the internet and the dangers it can pose. ■