A Behavioral Conceptualization of Suicide and Suicide Prevention

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The Current Issue

• 800,000 people die by suicide globally every year (Fazeel & Runeson, 2020)

• Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in North America and the leading cause of death worldwide amongst adults age 15-24 (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2021)

• Suicide rates in the US have climbed 1.5% per year since 2000 (Fazeel & Runeson, 2020)
What is Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)?

• ABA identifies environmental variables and their influence on behavior while applying behavioral principles to produce socially meaningful behavior change

• Many precursors to suicide are behaviors (Duarte et al., 2020; Runcan, 2020)
  • Withdrawal from activities, drug use, self-harm, suicide attempts, etc.

• Despite this, very little behavior-analytic research has been done to address this situation
Objectives

• Examine some of the existing approaches to suicide and suicide prevention

• Examine those approaches through a behavior-analytic lens

• Discuss potential behavior-analytic solutions and areas for future research for behavior analysts
Some Current Approaches

• **Cognitive Behavior Therapy**: Focuses on redirecting thought patterns and replacing negative thoughts with positive ones (Geschwind et al., 2019; Tarrier et al., 2008)

• **Dialectical Behavior Therapy**: A branch of CBT that focuses on teaching emotional regulation, which is believed to help with harmful behaviors; initially developed to combat suicidal behaviors (Katz & Korslund, 2020)

• **Acceptance & Commitment Therapy**: Based in ABA, assumes behaviors serve particular functions in one's environment (Murrell et al., 2014)
# Behavioral Accounts & Approaches to Suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)</th>
<th>Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT)</th>
<th>Acceptance &amp; Commitment Therapy (ACT)</th>
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<td>• Focuses on thoughts <em>causing</em> behavior, whereas ABA believes that thoughts <em>are</em> behavior known as &quot;private events&quot;</td>
<td>• Relies on behavioral chain analyses to examine relevant precursors and consequences to behavior (DiGiorgio et al., 2010)</td>
<td>• Suicidal behaviors are considered a learned method of problem solving to escape or avoid intense negative emotions/stimuli (Chiles &amp; Strosahl, 2005)</td>
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<td>• Reducing or redirecting negative thoughts leads to decreases in likelihood of suicidal ideation and behaviors, which in turn decreases likelihood of suicide (Tarrier et al., 2008)</td>
<td>• Uses behavioral skills training and exposure-based strategies (Katz &amp; Korslund, 2020)</td>
<td>• Experience Avoidance: suicidal behaviors serve to provide escape or avoidance of aversive events (negative reinforcement) (Murrell et al., 2014)</td>
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<td>• ABA focuses on environmental variables to change behavior rather than unobservable thoughts</td>
<td>• Conceptualizes suicidal behaviors as maladaptive problem solving, where the goal is to solve unbearable emotional distress (Rathus &amp; Miller, 2002)</td>
<td>• Teach individuals how to respond to unpleasant events appropriately (Murrell et al., 2014)</td>
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Current Gaps in the Literature

• Despite increases in research on interventions addressing self-injurious thoughts & behaviors (SITBs), there are currently no well-established treatments for suicidal or non-suicidal SITBs in youth (Glenn et al., 2015)

• Effect sizes tend to be smaller for studies involving children or adolescents (Fox et al., 2020)

• Intervention effects have not improved over time despite exponential increases in in randomized controlled studies examining SITBs (Fox et al., 2020)
Current Gaps in the Literature

• We largely attribute suicide and suicidal tendencies to mental illness, 54% of people who committed suicide had no known mental illnesses (Yampolsky & Kushner, 2020)

• There are increases in suicide rates despite increased intervention and awareness (Yampolsky & Kushner, 2020)
ABA Could Help

• Small shifts in the anticipated probability of rewarding vs punishing consequences of engaging in VR suicide caused significant decrease in VR suicide rates (Linthicum et al., 2019)

• Most approaches to suicide are theoretical; targeted, experimentally informed assessments to determine specific causes of SITBs may be helpful (Fox et al., 2020)
  • Similar to ABA's "functional analyses," which experimentally determine environmental variables maintaining behavior
ABA Could Help

- Many precursors to suicide are behavioral (substance abuse, social withdrawal, self-harm) (Duarte et al., 2020; Runcan, 2020)

- Despite this, very little behavior analytic research has been done to combat this issue

- Behavior analysts may provide a new set of expertise and solutions through ABA and should consider exploring this area further
References


References


