The Relationship Between Addiction and Suicide

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Facts About Suicide

- Every 15 minutes, someone dies by suicide in the US (CDC)
- Every 40 seconds worldwide (WHO)
- “Suicide is a preventable public health problem” - prevention efforts depend upon appropriate identification and screening (Kelly Posner, PhD)
Facts About Suicide

- 10th leading cause of death in the US
- 2nd leading cause of death for ages 15-24
- 4th leading cause of death for ages 18-65
- Highest rates are among Whites and Native Americans
- Attempts are 3x higher in women
- Completed suicides are 4x higher in men
- Firearms - most common method

(CDC)
Addiction and Suicide

- Next to mood disorders, substance abuse is the 2nd most significant risk factor for suicide (SAMHSA)
- ¼ to ½ of individuals who die by suicide were intoxicated or high at time of death (SAMHSA)
- People with substance use disorders are 10 times more likely to die by suicide than the general population (14x for those who inject drugs) (SAMHSA)
- About 17% of individuals in inpatient addiction programs have attempted suicide (Bakhshani et al., 2010)
Causes of the Relationship

- Alcohol/drug use and suicidality may have a common risk factor
- People with suicidal ideation and behaviors may use drugs or alcohol to cope
- People with drug and alcohol use problems often develop suicidal thoughts/behaviors
Common Risk Factors

● Genetic
  - Dopamine and serotonin genes
  - Genetic components of personality traits common in people with SUDs and suicidal behavior
    - Aggression
    - Decreased inhibition
    - Depression and anxiety

● Environmental
  - Trauma...
Self-Medication Hypothesis

- People with depression and suicidal thoughts may begin to use alcohol and other drugs to manage/numb negative emotions and painful thoughts.

- The chemical use becomes a primary coping strategy and addiction develops.

*Much like self-injury and other self-destructive behaviors, alcohol/drug use may be an unintentional attempt to AVOID or DELAY suicide and cope with life.*
Alcohol/Drug Use → Suicide

• Short-term effects of alcohol/drug use:
  - Decreased inhibition
  - Increased aggressiveness
  - Impaired judgment
  - Depressed mood
  - Withdrawal

• Long-term effects:
  • Brain changes that lead to depression and anxiety
  • Disruption to relationships, leading to social isolation
  • Decreased self-esteem
  • Grief and loss
  • Trauma

National Council for Behavioral Health, 2013
Clinical Implications

- Prevention
- Screening
- Intervention
Prevention

- Know the risk factors
  - For suicide: previous suicide attempts, depression, impulsivity, aggression, trauma, discrimination, bullying, hopelessness, low self-esteem, losses, social withdrawal, family conflict...

- Recognize warning signs for both substance abuse and suicide

- Increase protective factors...
Warning Signs

Substance Abuse

- Smell of alcohol, needle marks
- Slurred or rapid speech
- Lack of coordination or unsteady gait
- Enlarged or constricted pupils
- Tremors
- Mood swings
- Increasingly angry/defiant
- Overly energetic/lethargic
- Lying/rule breaking
- Missing appointments
- Short term memory loss
- Blackouts

Suicide

- Talking about death/suicide
- Searching for methods
- Talking about feeling hopeless
- Talking about feeling like a burden to others
- Reckless behavior
- Sleep disturbance
- Withdrawal/isolation
- Rage/extreme mood swings
- Losing interest in things or losing the ability to experience pleasure
Screening

- Screening for both suicidal thoughts and substance abuse should be integrated into primary care, behavioral health settings, online environments... anywhere people seek help.

- Screening for SUDs: CAGE, MAST/DAST

- Screening for suicidality:
  - C-SSRS - [http://www.cssrs.columbia.edu/](http://www.cssrs.columbia.edu/)
Intervention

- Expand access to treatment
- “No wrong door”
- Treat both suicidality and addiction as primary issues
- Treat them simultaneously
- Integrated treatment teams
- Long-term continuing care
- Evidence-based practices
Evidence-Based Practices

- Motivational Interviewing - to reduce shame around suicidal thoughts/behaviors and substance use

- Twelve Step Facilitation or another approach to encourage integration into a supportive social community

- Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy to address self-destructive patterns of thought and behavior
Thank you!