Suicide and the internet
Lucy Biddle, Jenny Donovan, Keith Hawton, Navneet Kapur and David Gunnell

BMJ 2008;336;800-802
doi:10.1136/bmj.39525.442674.AD

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/336/7648/800

These include:

References
This article cites 19 articles, 5 of which can be accessed free at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/336/7648/800#BIBL

Rapid responses
9 rapid responses have been posted to this article, which you can access for free at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/content/full/336/7648/800#responses
You can respond to this article at:
http://bmj.com/cgi/eletter-submit/336/7648/800

Email alerting service
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article - sign up in the box at the top left of the article

Topic collections
Articles on similar topics can be found in the following collections
Suicide (20 articles)
World Wide Web (282 articles)

Notes

To order reprints follow the "Request Permissions" link in the navigation box
To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://resources.bmj.com/bmj/subscribers
Recent reports of suicide by young people have highlighted the possible influence of internet sites. Lucy Biddle and colleagues investigate what a web search is likely to find.

**TOP 10 RETRIEVED SITES**

- Alt Suicide Holiday (ASH) suicide methods file (pro-suicide)
- Satan Service (pro-suicide)
- Suicide methods.net (pro-suicide)
- Wikipedia (information)
- Extreme River (against suicide)
- Satan Service (page not available)
- New Hope Health Clinic (against suicide)
- Amazon (advert for book on suicide)
- Soon (prevention and support)
- 23nl people§ (Not relevant to search term)

*See table 2 on bmj.com for additional detail.*

Use search engines, that queries are broad—mostly comprised of a few words and rarely including Boolean operators or phrase searches—and that users rarely look beyond the first page of results.11,14 We searched the internet in May 2007 for sites providing instructions and information about methods of suicide using the four most popular search engines (Google, Yahoo, MSN, and Ask) and 12 simple search terms (see box).

**What searches find**

We analysed the first 10 sites from each search, giving a total of 480 hits. Altogether 240 different sites were identified. Just under a fifth of hits (90) were for dedicated suicide sites (see table 1 on bmj.com). Half of these were judged to be encouraging, promoting, or facilitating suicide; 43 contained personal or other accounts of suicide methods, providing information and discussing pros and cons but without direct encouragement; and two sites portrayed suicide or self harm in fashionable terms. A further 44 (9%) hits were sites or pages that provided information about suicide methods in a purely factual (24), partly joking (12), or completely joking (8) fashion. Twelve hits were chat rooms or discussion boards that talked about methods of suicide.

Sites focusing on suicide prevention or offering support and sites forbidding or discouraging suicide accounted for 62 (13%) and 59 (12%) hits respectively.

The nature of sites retrieved with the four search engines varied. Google and Yahoo retrieved the highest number of dedicated suicide sites (Google 29, Yahoo 24, MSN 16, ASK 21), whereas MSN had the highest number of prevention or support sites (21), academic or policy sites (27), and irrelevant or unavailable hits (31).

Sites providing factual information about suicide, pro-suicide sites, and chat rooms discussing general issues relating to suicide occurred most often within the first few hitsso a search and thus are more likely to be accessed. Dedicated suicide sites and sites giving factual information about suicide had the highest proportion of number one ranks across searches (25% and 27%, respectively, of all first ranked sites). Addresses that were not available or relevant to the search term were the third most likely to be top ranked. This is partly because of eight references to a withdrawn Satan Service page.

The box above shows the 10 most frequently occurring sites found in our searches. The three most frequently occurring sites were all pro-suicide. Alt Suicide Holiday (ASH), whose material on methods of suicide was accessed using 10 different web addresses, appeared in half of all our 48 searches. Wikipedia was the fourth most frequently occurring site. The top four sites provided not only information but also evaluation of methods of suicide. This included, for instance, detailed information about speed, certainty, and the likely amount of pain associated with a method.

Just under half of the 480 web pages visited provided some information about methods of suicide. Almost all dedicated suicide and factual information sites provided such information but, notably, a fifth (21%) of support or prevention sites, over half (55%) of academic or policy sites, and all news reports of suicides also provided information about methods. A quarter of the hits provided more detailed evaluation of methods, most of which were dedicated suicide sites or other information sites. Chat rooms and discussion boards also regularly provided information about methods. A third of the hits referenced hanging.

This research shows it is very easy to obtain detailed technical information about methods...
of suicide, not just from the suicide sites that have caused recent concerns but also from information sites such as Wikipedia. Although dedicated suicide sites were the three most frequently occurring web pages, the searches retrieved an almost equal number of sites aimed at preventing suicide. Some of these seem to have used website optimisation methods to ensure their site is preferentially sourced by people seeking information about suicide methods.

Other influences

Information on methods is not the only way that the internet can contribute to suicidal behaviour. Contributors to chat rooms may exert peer pressure to commit suicide, idolise those who have completed suicide, and facilitate suicide pacts. Such discussion may lessen any doubts or fears of people who are uncertain about suicide. Pierre Baume and colleagues observed that people posting notes concerning suicide on the web are often initially ambivalent but that their resolve strengthens as others encourage them and backing out or seeking help becomes more difficult.

The internet may also have beneficial
may influence a person’s choice of methods—for example, the success rates of different methods
effects on suicide. Some users search the web for help and information and links to sources of help. Such sites also allow people to express and share their distress and so may have a positive function. Several websites provide information, screening questionnaires, advice, and encouragement about seeking help and treatment. Internet-based interventions have been used to help cope with depression, and supportive message boards and web rings exist to allow people to share coping strategies, normalise experiences, and empower people who self-harm by enabling them to tell their stories and reach out to others.18

In England rates of suicide among young (15-34 year old) men and women, the age groups who make most use of the internet, have been declining since the mid-1990s, a time when use of the internet has expanded rapidly.19 So cases of internet induced suicide may be offset by potential beneficial effects or other suicide prevention activities.

Controlling access

Any attempt to regulate suicide promotion needs to strike a balance between freedom of expression and public protection and the global nature of the internet.20 The main approaches to reducing potential harm from suicide sites include self regulation by internet service providers and use of filtering software by parents to block sites from

Lucy Biddle research fellow, professor of epidemiology, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 2PR
Jenny Donovan professor of social medicine, professor of epidemiology, Department of Social Medicine, University of Bristol, Bristol BS8 2PR
Keith Hawton professor of psychiatry, Centre for Suicide Research, University of Oxford Department of Psychiatry, Warneford Hospital, Oxford OX3 7JX
Navneet Kapur reader in psychiatry, Centre for Suicide Research, University of Oxford Department of Psychiatry, Warneford Hospital, Oxford OX3 7JX

Provenance and peer review: Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Competing interests: None declared.

Kapuri


2002;32:1374-5.


Michara BL, Weisstub DN. Ethical, legal, and practical issues in the control and regulation of suicide promotion and assistance over the internet.