

Research illuminates how online forum may offer suicide prevention support for males

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New research illuminates how some men and boys who are contemplating suicide are finding emotional support in an unexpected place: Reddit.

Sometimes referred to as the “front page of the Internet,” Reddit is a social news aggregation and discussion website that’s especially popular among young adult males.

The website includes several topic-specific subreddit discussion forums, one of which is SuicideWatch. The regulated space allows people who are experiencing suicidal thoughts to post anonymously about what they are going through and receive emotional support from other users.

As of this month, SuicideWatch has more than 96,000 subscribers.

University of Arizona sociology doctoral student Darla Still has been analyzing the content of anonymous posts made to SuicideWatch to learn more about what individuals go through when contemplating suicide and how they express those thoughts and feelings to others.

Among her early findings, which she presented today at the American Sociological Association Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, is that the SuicideWatch subreddit may provide a unique source of gender-specific support for men and boys.

Although Reddit does not identify users by gender, Still

focused on a subset of posts in which gender was implied by the posts' content. For example, users wrote things like "I am a joke of man," or referred to instances in which they've been told to "be a man" or "man up."

Responses to those posts often contained gendered language of their own, like, "Hey, bro, I've been through that before," or, "What's bothering you, man?"

Still suggests that the use of that type of gendered language is meaningful.

"It's about knowing that you're not the only one who's going through what you're going through, and being able to identify that you're not alone," she said. "We see this as a space where men may be a little more at ease to be vulnerable and express those emotions because of the screen and the anonymity."

Still decided to focus on posts by males because while females are twice as likely as males to attempt suicide, males are three times more likely to die by suicide.

Men also underreport mental health symptoms, and many scholars have theorized that men have more difficulty openly expressing emotions than women due to the ways in which they are socialized with masculine norms.

"If you think about stereotypical masculinity theories, men are socialized to believe that expressing emotions is weak," said Still, who presented her work with her collaborators Amelia Blume, a UA sociology doctoral student, and Charlene Hack, who earned her bachelor's degree in sociology from the UA in 2017.

"Our main goal was to bring attention to this issue and try to move away from the stigma that men, in particular, face," Still said.

Males who feel uncomfortable talking about their emotions with loved ones or mental health professionals – or those who are unable to do so – might find an alternative or supplemental option in posting anonymously online, Still said.

Still's initial findings were based on an analysis of 3,125 posts collected between mid-October 2017 and early January of this year.

Going forward, she will continue to analyze 165,000 posts and more than 1 million comments submitted to the SuicideWatch subreddit between 2009 and 2017. She hopes to gain a better understanding of what both men and women go through when contemplating suicide and how an online forum might offer support.

"We know that men underreport mental health symptoms, so this is giving us a better understanding of the suicidality experience of what men go through, and what's specific to men in comparison to women," Still said. "The fact that this space on Reddit is there – we don't know, but maybe it's helped somebody."