

REPORT



Psychological pain and suicidal ideation in undergraduates: The role of pain avoidance

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ABSTRACT

In the present study, the first with a Western sample, we tested the relationship between three dimensions of psychological pain and suicidal ideation in a sample of 331 Portuguese college students. When controlling for the effect of depressive symptoms, the avoidance dimension, but not the cognitive and affective dimensions of psychological pain, made a significant contribution in predicting the three indicators of suicidal ideation. According to these results, psychotherapeutic action may focus either on enabling clients to tolerate mental pain or on providing more effective and adaptive strategies to cope with this pain.

Suicidal ideation is an important risk factor for subsequent death by suicide (e.g., Baca-Garcia et al., 2011). Various models have been proposed to explain suicide risk, including psychological models (Klonsky, May, & Saffer, 2016). One model is that of Shneidman (1996) who stated that psychological pain is a necessary condition for the occurrence of suicidal behaviors. Several empirical studies report an important relationship between psychological pain and the risk of suicide, and more specifically, between psychological pain and suicidal ideation (see Verrocchio et al., 2016). For example, in a longitudinal study with college students, psychological pain was statistically associated with suicidal ideation, and changes in psychological pain were also significantly associated with changes in suicidal ideation when controlling for depression and hopelessness (Troister, Davis, Lowndes & Holden, 2013).

More recently, Li et al. (2014) elaborated and tested a 3-dimensional psychological pain model, comprising three components: cognitive, affective, and avoidance. The affective dimension encompasses the subjective and somatic symptoms related to psychological pain that the individual perceives as painful. The cognitive dimension comprises pain that derives from memories related to past traumatic experiences such as loss, frustration, and social exclusion. The avoidance dimension represents the tendency to consider suicide as the way to escape from experienced psychological

pain. Researchers hypothesize avoidance to be the most important predictor of suicidal motivation.

Three studies with non-Western samples of patients with major depression or university students have been reported. Xie et al. (2014) tested this 3-dimensional perspective using a group of depressed individuals and a control group. They concluded that suicidal ideation was influenced by a tendency to avoid psychological pain and that psychological pain may be a trigger for suicidal behaviors, even in the absence of depression. Additionally, within patients with major depression, Li et al. (2014) demonstrated that high levels of pain avoidance during a depressive episode represented the primary variable associated with the motivation for suicide. They speculated that the avoidance component would make a greater contribution to suicidal behaviors than depression or psychological pain, assessed globally. Finally, in a sample of university students, depressive symptoms and pain avoidance predicted suicidal ideation at both the concurrent time and at the most severe time (Li, Fu, Zou, & Cui, 2017).

To our knowledge, the contribution of this 3-dimensional model of suicidal ideation and behaviors has not been investigated in a Western sample. That was our purpose. We hypothesized that the avoidance dimension would make a significant contribution to the prediction of suicidal ideation when controlling for depressive symptoms. In the context of a larger