

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Exposure to suicide in the family: Suicide risk and psychache in individuals who have lost a family member by suicide

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Objective: The aim of the present study was to compare a sample of Portuguese individuals exposed to suicide in their families with a control group, for lifetime suicidality. This study also evaluated the incremental value of psychache (i.e., extreme psychological pain) in determining suicide risk beyond the contribution associated with having lost a family member by suicide.

Method: A total of 225 community adults participated. Two groups were defined: a group exposed to suicide ($n = 53$), and a control group ($n = 172$).

Results: Results demonstrated that groups did significantly differ on the total score of the Suicide Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R), on the four individual SBQ-R items, and on psychache. Results from a hierarchical multiple regression analysis demonstrated that having lost a family member by suicide and the construct of psychache each provided a significant unique contribution to explaining variance in suicide risk. The interaction between group membership and psychache also provided a further enhancement to the statistical prediction of suicide risk.

Conclusion: Findings are discussed with regard to their implications for clinical intervention and postvention.

KEYWORDS

family member, psychache, suicide exposure, suicide risk

1 | INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, approximately 1 million people die by suicide every year (National Institute of Mental Health, 2009). In addition to these lives lost, the consequences for the mental health of surviving friends and family members can be severe and long-lasting (McMenamy, Jordan, & Mitchell, 2008; Pompili, Lester, Leenaars, Tatarelli, & Girardi, 2008). The impact of this phenomenon is further magnified in that most estimates of suicide rates are probably underestimates,