POLICY BRIEF

The Impact of Suicide Bereavement on Family Members in Ireland

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Executive Summary

- Research focussing on the impact of suicide bereavement on family members' physical and psychological health is scarce.
- The systematic review indicates that suicide-bereaved family members are at an increased risk for a number of adverse physical health outcomes after the death.
- The interview study revealed that suicide-bereaved family members experienced adverse mental, physical and psychosomatic health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, nausea, vomiting, chest pains, hypertension and diabetes.

INTRODUCTION

Just under 800,000 people take their own lives every year¹. An estimated 60 people are directly and intimately affected for every suicide. Also, 1 in 5 people will be exposed to suicide during their lifetime². Ireland has seen a significant increase in rates of suicide, which has been attributed to the economic recession and subsequent austerity³.

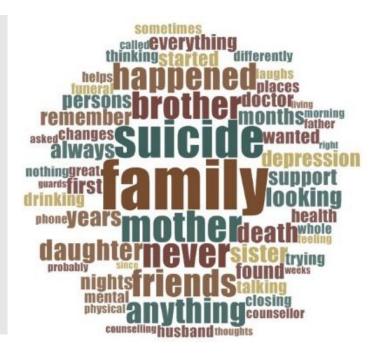
Research shows that people bereaved by suicide have an increased risk of a number of adverse mental health outcomes including self-harm, depression and suicide⁴. However, little research has been conducted into the overall health impact of suicide bereavement on family members.

Additionally, it is unclear what support services are required for family members bereaved by suicide in Ireland. This policy brief aims to highlight the main health impacts experienced by family members in Ireland, in order to prioritise high quality support services to address these health problems.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH IMPACTS AND SUPPORT NEEDS OF PEOPLE BEREAVED BY SUICIDE?

To answer this question, we conducted in-depth interviews with 18 family members bereaved by suicide in Ireland to understand their experiences.

We also conducted a systematic review of the quantitative literature to examine the physical and psychosomatic health impacts of suicide bereavement. We found 24 studies, which were conducted in a wide number of countries worldwide that were included in the review.



RESULTS

The systematic review found that people bereaved by suicide were at increased risk for a number of adverse physical health conditions, including chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), hypertension, diabetes and cardiovascular disease (CVD). They also experienced more physical health complaints, physical illnesses and physical pain.

The qualitative study found that participants also experienced adverse psychosomatic health experiences including feelings of nausea, vomiting, chest pains, palpitations, physical pain, abdominal pains, and breathlessness. Sometimes, these symptoms continued in the months after the death and were associated with diagnoses such as hypertension, diverticulitis and type 1 diabetes.

Due to these health difficulties, adequate formal and informal support was crucial for family members. Participants endorsed informal support as being equally important as formal support. Participants spoke of difficulties accessing formal support services due to grief reactions, being unsure where to access such support and not having the financial means to pay for such support.

RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

The findings indicate that family members bereaved by suicide are a particularly vulnerable group, and efforts are required to prevent and ameliorate such physical and psychological harm after suicide.

- Greater awareness amongst health
 professionals of the elevated levels of
 psychological and physical ill-health is required.
 Health professionals, coroners and any other
 professional in contact with those bereaved by
 suicide should pro-actively facilitate support for
 those bereaved by suicide.
- Better availability of formal support services is crucial, where accessing such support is not dependent on financial status.
- More longitudinal and controlled studies are required, to fully understand how family members' health is impacted following the death.

Links to full-text of <u>systematic review</u> and <u>qualitative</u> <u>study</u>

SUPPORT SERVICES

- Suicide Support and Information: http://suicidesupportandinformation.ie/
- Samaritans: 116 123 (free phone); text message (standard text rates apply: 087 2609090); email: jo@samaritans.ie
- Aware: www.aware.ie; 1800 804848 (free phone); email: supportmail@aware.ie

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