

## **STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING SUICIDE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES OF UNIVERSITIES IN EBONYI STATE**

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### **Abstract**

*The study investigated the strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates of universities in Ebonyi State. Three research questions guided the study and employed descriptive survey research design. The population of the study consisted sixteen thousand six hundred and ten (16,610) of all the students and some relevant staff of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki. The sample size for the study comprised one hundred and fifty (150) students and fifty (50) relevant staff randomly selected from the entire population. Questionnaire was used for data collection. Data collected were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. The research findings revealed that negative self-esteem, depression, self-administration of a psychoactive substance, among others are factors that predisposes students to suicide in universities in Ebonyi State; also that promoting and supporting research on suicide prevention, reducing access to convenient means of suicide among others are the students and school-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State. It was recommended among others that seminars/workshops and enlightenment campaigns on depression, self-destructive behaviours and suicide should be organize for students periodically.*

**Keywords:** Strategies, preventing suicide, undergraduate, predispose, depression and staff.

### **Introduction**

The rate of suicide in our society today more especially in the universities is quite alarming. Ajibola and Agunbiade (2021) maintained that in Nigeria, suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people aged 15 to 29 years. The World Health Organization (2001) defined suicide as the act of killing oneself, deliberately initiated and performed by person concerned in the full knowledge, or expectation of its fatal outcome. Crosby, Ortega and Melanson (2011) also defined suicide as death caused by self-

directed injurious behaviour with any intent to die as a result of the behaviour. In this study, suicide simply means the intentional taking of one's own life. Suicide as the intentional taking of one's own life has become a household name. Vijayakumar (2015) asserted that suicide and related behaviours such as depression, frustration, drug addiction, hopelessness are significant public health problems, and these behaviours have significantly increased worldwide in recent decades. Within the last decade, cases of suicide attempts and suicide among young people have been reported in Nigeria (Aloba, Ojeleye & Aloba, 2017; Aloba, Adefemi & Aloba, 2018). They also hold that there have been several cases of adults jumping into the lagoon and others hanging themselves. But the trend has drastically changed in the last few years as more youths are today taking their lives especially through poisoning themselves. The use of chemicals such as Snipers in ending one's own life had become rampant in the recent years.

Nigeria now ranks very high among the nations of the world in the cases of suicide. Obinna and Olawale (2019) recorded that the data released by World Health Organisation (WHO), an estimated 800,000 people die by suicide annually and Nigeria now ranks among the top suicide prone countries. In the World population review, Nigeria with a crude suicide rate of 9.5 per 100,000 populations ranks 10th in Africa and 67th in the world on the suicide table.

Abdulazeez (2020) had it that students top in the list as 42 Nigerians who commit suicide in 6 repetition months. According to Alfred (2019), thirteen (13) Nigerian students were reportedly lost to suicide cases in 8 months. It is likely that there are still many more unrecorded suicidal cases in Nigeria as many families dread to make public such awful piece of information because of fear of social stigmatisation attached to suicide in Nigerian cultural setting. In some Nigerian cultures, an individual who committed suicide is not buried but have his or her corpse thrown into the evil forest. Some others see the family of the affected individual as being cursed and sometimes even fear to marry from such families. In fact, in the Nigerian cultural setting, suicide is seen as a taboo. Oladele and Oladele (2016) had it that Africans have the thought that individual who engages in the act of suicide is cast under a spell. Due to these beliefs, information regarding suicidal ideation, suicide plans and attempts is often not available in Nigeria.

The rate of suicide is still on the increase despite many strategies adopted by various bodies and organisations in curbing suicide worldwide. For instance, World Health Organisation has earlier outlined three elaborate strategies to counter the several risk factors that culminate to increase a person's vulnerability to suicidal behaviour. These strategies include "Universal" prevention strategy. Universal prevention strategy addresses the entire population, such as school, community, or state, regardless of the level of risk of individuals within that population. Universal prevention strategy aims to increase access to health care, promote mental health, reduce harmful use of alcohol, limit access to the means for suicide and promote responsible media reporting. The second one is the "Selective" prevention strategy. Selective prevention strategy addresses at-risk groups such as persons who have suffered trauma or abuse, those affected by conflict or disaster, refugees and migrants, and persons bereaved by suicide, by training "gatekeepers" who assist the vulnerable and by offering helping services such as help lines with the goal of preventing the onset of suicidal behaviours. The third one is the "Indicated" strategy. Indicated intervention strategy addresses individuals deemed high risk by virtue of prior suicide attempt or suicidal ideation. It targets specific vulnerable individuals with community support, follow-up for those leaving health care facilities, education, and training for health workers and improved identification and management of mental and substance use disorder, ; restricting access to the means of lethal (completed) suicide, such as pesticides registrations and regulations (WHO, 2012).

Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) put up Suicide Research and Prevention Initiative (SURPIN) to fight suicidal tendency in Nigeria. Suicide Research and prevention Initiative (SURPIN) is an Institutionalised structure for suicide research and prevention in the country founded by Lagos University Teaching Hospital (LUTH) in the year 2017, with the main purpose of preventing suicide through research, crisis- intervention, health education and early treatment of depression and drug abuse, which are major risk factors for suicide (Adelowo, 2019).

It is an illusion to believe that the problem of suicide is still that of the industrialized countries only. According to Clayton (2013), suicide is also a growing challenge in developing countries. Specifically,

Ogunseye (2011) reported that suicide is a daunting problem in Nigeria. The most disturbing aspect of this ugly development is that undergraduate students currently engage in it. Documented evidence in Nigeria revealed that younger individuals committed suicide more frequently than was the case in the past. According to Nwankwo (2016), the youngest victim among the sample they studied in Benin City was only 15. Offia and Obiorah (2014) showed that the youngest case in the study they conducted in Niger Delta area was 16 years old while a preponderance (66%) of all the victims were between 10-29 years of age.

The report was the same from other parts of Nigeria. For instance, Ugwoke (2016) reported the suicide of a 15 year-old boy who hanged himself in Lagos. Ajuwon (2013) on the other hand reported that a 20 year old boy killed himself by ingesting pesticide in Ondo town. According to Atiatah (2007), 16.75% of the suicide cases in the research she carried out in Akwa-Ibom state were aged 15-24.

It is worthy to note that any available data on suicide among students or any other group in Nigeria were merely a tip of the iceberg. This is because Nigeria is one of the countries that tend to conceal suicide (Atiatah, 2007). Ugwoke (2016) in a study carried out in Ebonyi State found that four cases of suicide were reported among undergraduate students. All of them were aged below 19 years while the youngest victim was barely 13. Expectedly, suicide was ranked the 4<sup>th</sup> cause of death in the country by World Health Organization (WHO, 2010).

Life stressors, on the other hand are on a high increase, and are inevitable in one's life. The numerous efforts and strategies by the Federal government of Nigeria, World Health Organisation and other agencies to curb suicide, such as banning of some insecticide like Snipers that have been found to be the most frequently used in committing suicide, increasing access to health facilities, crisis intervention schemes, and health education among others seem not to have yielded much result. Hence, what are strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates of universities in Ebonyi State

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study focused on the strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates of universities in Ebonyi State. Specifically, the study to determined:

1. factors that predispose undergraduate students to commit suicide in universities in Ebonyi State.
2. students-related strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduate in universities in Ebonyi State.
3. school-related strategies for preventing suicide tendencies among undergraduate in universities in Ebonyi State.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the factors predispose undergraduate students to suicide in universities in Ebonyi State?
2. What are the students-related strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates in universities in Ebonyi State?
3. What are the school-related strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduate in universities in Ebonyi State?

### **Methodology**

#### **Design of the Study**

The study adopted survey research design

#### **Area of the Study**

The study was carried out in universities in Ebonyi State Nigeria.

### **Population of the Study**

The population of this study comprised all the undergraduate students of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki which is thirteen thousand, nine hundred and seventeen (13,917), medical centre personnel two thousand, three hundred (2300) staff, student affairs staff three hundred (300), and hostel staff one

hundred (100) staff making it a total population of sixteen thousand, six hundred and ten (16,610) in number (Umoke, 2021).

### **Sample for the Study**

Based on the available records:- one hundred and fifty (150) students and fifty (50) relevant staff of the university which include medical centre personnel, student affair staff and hostel staff which is total of two hundred (200) were randomly selected from the entire population of sixteen thousand, six hundred and ten (16,610), to form the sample of the study.

### **Instrument for Data Collection**

The instrument for data collection for this study was a self structured questionnaire titled Strategies for Preventing Suicide Questionnaire (SPSQ). It had a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree. The instrument contained a total of 20 items.

### **Data Collection Methods**

The copies of the instrument were administered directly to respondents and filled copies collected at the spot with the help of two research assistants who already had a previous knowledge of research work.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The data were analyzed using mean and standard deviation to answer the research question.

### **Results**

**Research question 1:** What are the factors predispose undergraduate students to suicide in universities in Ebonyi State?

Table 1: **Mean Response on Factors that Predispose Students to Suicide**

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
1.	Negative self-esteem	3.10	0.89	Agree
2.	Depression	3.10	0.92	Agree
3.	Self-administration of a psychoactive substance e.g alcohol and drug	3.11	0.89	Agree
4.	Interpersonal conflict between parents and siblings	3.14	0.86	Agree
5.	Pre-existing family psychiatric conditions and suicidal behavior	3.19	0.82	Agree
6.	Low school achievement	3.12	0.90	Agree
7.	Betrayal-treachery, denial and disappointment	3.17	0.86	Agree
8.	Guilt- making derogatory remarks on someone	2.97	0.97	Agree
9.	Trauma such as physical and sexual abuse	3.12	0.92	Agree

Table 1 presents the opinions of respondents on the factors that predispose students to suicide among undergraduate students in universities in Ebonyi State. From the table, the mean scores of respondents with their corresponding standard deviation for items 1,2,3, 4,5,6,7,8 and 9 respectively are seen to be within the criterion mean of 2.50 and above for acceptance level. Therefore, all items under the factors that predispose students to suicide in universities in Ebonyi State were considered acceptable. This is an indication that the respondents considered the items as factors that predispose students to suicide in universities in Ebonyi State.

**Research question 2:** What are the students-related strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates in universities in Ebonyi State?

**Table 2: Mean Response on the Students-Related Strategies for Preventing Suicide**

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
10.	Increase help-seeking behaviours among students	3.13	0.88	Agree
11.	Attend public education about suicide including risk factors, warning signs and available help	3.19	0.84	Agree
12.	Developing and implementing strategies to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health services	3.08	0.93	Agree
13.	Attending training to recognize at-risk behaviours	3.13	0.87	Agree
14.	Attending screening programs in school to identify risk factors for suicide	3.19	0.87	Agree
15.	Promoting and supporting research on suicide prevention	3.03	0.98	Agree
16.	Improving self-esteem/complex	3.13	0.87	Agree
17.	Improvement of health	3.08	0.93	Agree
18.	Influence of family background	3.13	0.88	Agree

Table 2 presents the opinions of respondents on the students-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State. From the table, the mean scores of respondents with their corresponding standard deviation for items 10,11,12,13,14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 respectively are seen to be within the criterion mean of 2.50 and above for acceptance level. Therefore, all items under the students-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State were considered acceptable. This is an indication that the respondents considered the items as students-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State.

**Question 3: What are the school-related strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduate in universities in Ebonyi State?**

**Table 3: Mean Response on the School-Related Strategies for Preventing Suicide**

S/N	Items	$\bar{x}$	SD	Decision
19.	Reducing access to convenient means of suicide e.g. toxic substances	3.04	0.94	Agree
20.	Increase students access to mental health services	2.98	0.99	Agree
21.	Ensure a comprehensive campus mental health promotion and suicide prevention program to identify and resolve mental health problems	3.29	0.94	Agree
22.	Organizing suicide awareness campaigns	3.13	0.91	Agree
23.	Educate students about stress, depression, self-destructive behaviours and suicide	3.19	0.86	Agree
24.	Reducing academic stress or strain	3.05	0.90	Agree
25.	Increase poor relationship with peers	3.18	0.95	Agree
26.	Guiding against embarking on wrong course of study	3.19	0.96	Agree
27.	High expectation by family	3.17	0.81	Agree

Table 3 presents the opinions of respondents on the school-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State. From the table, the mean scores of respondents with their corresponding standard deviation for items 19,20,21,22, 23, 24, 25, 26 and 27 respectively are seen to be within the criterion mean of 2.50 and above for acceptance level. Therefore, all items under the school-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State were considered acceptable. This is an indication that the respondents considered the items as school-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State.

**Discussion**

The result of research question one indicated that respondents agreed that Negative self-esteem, depression, self-administration of a psychoactive substance, interpersonal conflict between parents and

siblings, pre-existing family psychiatric conditions and suicidal behavior, low school achievement, betrayal, Guilt and trauma are the factors that predisposes students to suicide among undergraduate students in universities in Ebonyi State. The findings confirmed Becky (2015) findings that loneliness, depression, hopelessness, anger, conflict, social pressure, drug abuse and illness are causes of suicide among university students in Kenya. Brausch (2008) reported that depression is one of the leading causes of suicide among youths.

The result of research question two reported that promoting and supporting research on suicide prevention, reducing access to convenient means of suicide, increase students access to mental health services and ensure a comprehensive campus mental health promotion and suicide prevention program to identify and resolve mental health problems, increasing help-seeking behaviours among students, public education about suicide including risk factors, training students to recognize at-risk behaviours, screening programs in school to identify risk factors for suicide, organizing suicide awareness campaigns, educate students about stress, depression, self-destructive behaviours, Improving self-esteem/complex, improvement of health and Influence of family background, reducing academic stress or strain, reduce failure relationship with peers, guiding against embarking on wrong course of study, High expectation by family are the students and school-related strategies for preventing suicide in universities in Ebonyi State. The study corroborates with the submissions of Suicide Prevention Resource Centre (2018) that the problem of suicide and suicidal behaviours in Universities cannot be left solely to counsellors and mental health centers. They suggested a comprehensive campus mental health promotion and suicide prevention program in the campus. The study is also in line with Peterson (2018) who describes several prevention efforts which include, creating a mental health task force, raising awareness in the college community about symptoms of mental illness, teaching about risk factors for suicide, restricting access to lethal means, offering programs focusing on strengthening life skills, and matching the mental health resources on campus to the demand for services.

In Africa and Nigeria in Particular, suicide is seen as a taboo and therefore, the relations and families of victims of suicide and suicidal ideations are stigmatized. Due to the sensitive nature of suicide in Nigeria, undergraduates are not freely open to report that they ever thought of killing themselves because of the stigma attached to suicide. This finding is similar to Becky (2015) who considered creating an institutional framework for the prevention and control of suicide and suicidal tendencies, provision of knowledge within educational institutions and establishes individual interventions and awareness in academic institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings from this study, the researchers conclude that the strategies for preventing suicide among undergraduates of universities in Ebonyi State are increasing help-seeking behaviours among students, public education about suicide including risk factors, warning signs and available help, developing and implementing strategies to reduce the stigma associated with seeking mental health services, training students to recognize at-risk behaviours, screening programs in school to identify risk factors for suicide, organizing suicide awareness campaigns, educate students about stress, depression, self-destructive behaviours and suicide among others. Although the findings indicated that there are effective strategies for prevention of suicide, future studies should continue to strive towards improved preventive measures for University students.

### **Recommendations**

Sequel to the findings and discussions from the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The government should mandate the Universities authorities to establish University based mental health services in various Universities in Ebonyi State.
2. University authorities should ensure that possessions of lethal weapons by students in the campuses are checked and any student found with lethal weapons is dismissed or suspended to serve as a deterrent to others.

3. Adequate seminars/ workshops and enlightenment campaigns on depression, self-destructive behaviours, failure relationship and suicide should be organized for students periodically.
4. The parents/family should educate their children/wards as well as other family members on the need of the danger of suicide in the hope of prevention.

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