

## The Need for Drastic Measures to Control the Development of Suicidal Thoughts in Adolescents in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions

Samaila Muhammad<sup>1</sup>, Sanusi Sani Danmali<sup>2</sup>, Mukhtar Abubakar Hassan<sup>3</sup>, Mahmud Malami Shallah<sup>4</sup>  
& Kabiru Attahiru<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> & <sup>4</sup>Department of Educational Psychology,  
School of Education,  
Federal College of Education, Gidan Madi,  
Sokoto State

<sup>2</sup>Department of Curriculum and Instructions,  
School of Education,  
Federal College of Education, Gidan Madi,  
Sokoto State

<sup>3</sup>Department of Psychology,  
Northwest University, Sokoto

<sup>5</sup>Sokoto State Teachers Service Board

Corresponding author's email:  
samailamuhammad960@gmail.com

---

### Abstract

*The paper critically studied the concept of suicidal thoughts and the factors thought to be responsible for the mental health problem particularly with regard to how it affects students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Issues brought to the fore by the paper as risk factors for development of suicidal thoughts among adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions included students' redundancy due to unresolved prolonged industrial disputes between public institutions and government, substance addiction, identity crisis and role confusion, excessive imitation of Western lifestyles, poor rapport between students and their lecturers, domestic violence, and academic problems such as examination misconduct and low grades. The paper also discussed the implications suicidal thoughts have on students' academic struggles and personality development. Implications highlighted included higher tendencies for neurotic and psychotic behaviours, loss of interest in studies, withdrawal from academic programmes, academic failure, and increased rate of substance misuse. However, measures highlighted by the paper as suggestions which could be applied to tackle the identified problems were establishment of offices or centers within the vicinities of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, where student-lecturer interpersonal relationships could be monitored and evaluated through conduct of surveys on the emotionality of lecturers in relation to their students; consistent organization of e-workshops in tertiary institutions to groom students on how to evaluate and stabilize their affects themselves, thereby preventing and controlling negative thoughts infesting their mind, putting them at the risk of different mental health issues such as suicidal thoughts, substance misuse, domestic violence, etc; and that government's full subsidization of education and improvement of curricula be ensured so that students emerge self-reliant on graduation.*

**Keywords:** suicidal thoughts, adolescent, student, tertiary institution, measure, Nigeria

---

### Introduction

It is quite obvious that several students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria have at different times been reported to have committed suicide, or attempted to do so and ended up in moribund clinical conditions. The mere mention of the term *suicide* sends shivers down the spines of many people because it is something that

involves aggression and abrupt loss of life. Ladi-Akinyemi et al. (2023) define suicidal thoughts as having thoughts of committing suicide. Rebound Behavioural Health (2023) defines suicidal thoughts as a term used to describe situations in which a person is preoccupied with taking their own life. Suicidal ideation can range from a fleeting thought to a detailed plan and can be deliberately designed to fail or carefully planned to succeed.

Really most people always cringe at the subject of suicidal thoughts not because the subject is unfamiliar or unknown, but because of its being a highly despicable thing. Suicide is an unspeakable source of horror viewed and treated as an abomination in many cultures in Africa. Suicidal thoughts is the thought to end one's life. Reasons for the development of this horrendous, aggressive instinct vary from individual to individual just as the means for its execution vary. Choi et al. (2017) maintain that a suicidal thought, which includes both verbal and non-verbal manifestations, represents a clinical emergency in psychiatry. They uphold that a previous study reported that individuals with suicidal thoughts had a higher risk for suicide attempt than those without suicidal thoughts. Individuals inhabited by suicidal thoughts whether or not culminating with their rushed, preemptive extinction are victims of their own aggression.

Suicidal thoughts in adolescent individuals is a common global phenomenon, which does not only threaten the functionality and socioemotional wellbeing of the individuals involved, but have serious impact in several ways on the overall development of the societies where such victims live. Thus, it is normal to state that suicide or suicidal thoughts is quite a significant public mental health issue in virtually all nations. Suicidal thoughts refer to thoughts that are targeted at ending one's life (Akanni & Oduaran, 2019). Adolescents normally happen to be highly susceptible to psychological issues such as suicide or suicidal thoughts.

Suicidal thoughts inhabit many undergraduate students in Nigerian universities (Oginyi et al., 2018). Suicidal thoughts are one of the three categories of suicidal behaviour as explained by the Center for Studies of Suicide Prevention at the National Institute of Mental Health, United States (Beck et. al. as cited in Oquendo, Halberstam, & Mann, 2003). These categories are completed suicide, attempted suicide, and suicidal idea.

Cases of suicide and suicidal attempts are on the rise globally, and Nigeria has its own share of the menace. Most individuals reported to have committed or made attempts to commit suicide the world over were adolescents. Adolescence is the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. World Health Organization ([WHO] as cited in Csikszentmihalyi, 2023) defines an adolescent as any person between ages 10 and 19.

In 2012, eight hundred and four thousand suicide-related deaths were recorded globally (WHO, 2017). WHO further reported that 1.4% of all deaths were by suicide. Moreover, WHO (2019) stated that suicide had caused over 800,000 deaths every year. WHO (as cited in Akpunne et al., 2022) reports that Nigeria tops African countries and ranks fifth in the countries with acute suicide cases worldwide.

Based on reports published by the Nation (2021, May 13), Emmanuel Adedeji, a 200-level student of Management and Accounting in Obafemi Awolowo University (OAU), Ile Ife, committed suicide; Daniel Mba, a 300-level student of Biochemistry in University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN) committed suicide by jumping from the third floor of a storey building to end his life; and Arikekpar Lucky, a 200-level student of the Department of History and Diplomacy at the Federal University, Otuoke (FUO), Bayelsa State. All these incidents took place just months apart.

Similarly, Muhammad (2021, February 16) wrote that a 400-level student of the Federal University, Dutse, Jigawa State, Abdullahi Bashir of the Department of Mathematics committed suicide. Moreover, Olowuyi

(2020, June 23) reported that the impeached President of the Student Union of the Federal Polytechnic Ilaro, Olatunji Adegboye, who was arrested for allegedly being involved in cultism by the Ogun State Police Command, dropped a suicide note. Sahara Reporters (2023, January 21) reported that a 300-level student of the Federal University of Technology, Akure (FUTA), Olona Joseph Oluwapelumi, had committed suicide.

Nigeria with a population of over 200 million is one of the epicenters of suicide in the world with a suicide estimate of 17.3 per 100 000, which is higher than the global (10.5 per 100 000) and Africa (12.0 per 100 000) estimates; and according to global statistics, since 2012 there has been an increase in suicide rate Nigeria (Oyetunji et al., 2021). These data are despite all the inadequate proper documentation of public health issues in the country. Kukoyi et al. (2023) write that low-income countries including Nigeria have a higher prevalence rate of suicidal thoughts and self-harm as compared to high income countries; and that school undergraduates have bio-psychosocial problems which could explain the high prevalence in African countries, such that in Nigeria a study reported a prevalence rate of 20% for suicidal thoughts among young people.

All the above stories or reports narrated on suicide incidents make it evident that the menace certainly exists in Nigerian tertiary institutions, and there are indications of dearth of serious measures taken by relevant authorities or stakeholders to curb the phenomenon. Psychologically, all suicide cases and suicide attempts start on the mind. The starting point of every suicide attempt, whether accomplished or not, is the victim's mind.

A suicide victim's mind becomes loaded with death instinct which compels them to engage in risky and destructive behaviours that could lead to death. Sigmund Freud's theory explains that the human mind requires a psychological balance, which he calls *superego*, to control *thanatos* (death instinct), which suicide or suicidal thoughts is a form of. Victims of suicide irresistibly first develop feelings about doing things that remove them out of the world. Such emotions or feelings assessed by mental health professionals in their bid to develop measures that can be applied to prevent and control the menace in society generally.

### **Risk Factors for Development of Suicidal Thoughts in Adolescents**

1. **Child abuse:** A childhood history of sexual or physical abuse is highly prevalent in borderline personality disorder (BPD) and is associated with self-destructive behaviour which includes suicide and suicidal thoughts (Soloff, Lynch, & Kelly, 2002; and Lipschitz, D., 1999).
2. **Anxiety and depression:** Symptoms of these mental disorders together with pain and muscular tension have been associated with nearly double increased risk for the development of suicidal thoughts during adolescence; and more so in boys than girls (Strandheim et al., 2014). When depression sets in, college students may think that life is not worth living and considers termination of life as an option (Akanni & Oduaran, 2019).
3. **Traditional bullying:** Traditional bullying refers to aggressive behaviour that occurs between people in schools, neighbourhoods, or other places (Bannink, Broeren, Looij-Jansen, Waart, & Raat (2014).
4. **Family History of Mental Disorder:** It is discovered that individuals descending from ancestors suffering from certain psychological disorders are more vulnerable to development of suicidal thoughts (Bloch-Elkouby, 2020).
5. **Interpersonal Problems:** Relationship problems between people normally instigate stress, anxiety and depression, which in turn may arouse aggressive emotions such as suicidal thoughts (Bloch-Elkouby, 2020).

Furthermore, based on observations, the paper puts forward other factors which equally increase the risk for development of suicidal thoughts particularly in adolescents studying in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

1. **Students' redundancy due to prolonged unresolved industrial disputes between government and tertiary institutions:** as strikes by universities and other institutions span months unresolved, many students become idle and may start to feel hopeless, distressed, and depressed, thereby developing such evil thoughts against themselves.
2. **Substance addiction:** misuse of drugs and other substances often cause psychological disorders or problems, among which is suicidal ideation. An individual may start to abuse certain substances or drugs in order to soothe themselves but in the long run ends up addicted and more depressed. Drugs/ substances are naturally addictive.
3. **Identity crisis and role confusion:** Observably, many students in Nigerian tertiary institutions experience identity crisis. Identity crisis, an Erikson's term, is a period of questioning one's sense of identity. This is in most cases peculiar to adolescents whereby they feel disgruntled or dissatisfied with the turns they are taking in life. They feel hopeless, anxious and distressed about their lives and regret what they have done or their failure to do what they should have done. Such feelings of distress and worthlessness are dangerous, for they lead to destructive instincts such as suicidal thought. Any person can experience a period of identity crisis at one point or another. Role confusion, however, another term in Erikson's model of psychosocial development, refers to dearth of positive specific commitment to certain goals, occupation, relationship, ideology, etc, towards the end of adolescence phase. At the point of identity crisis, certain positive achievements may have been made, but in role confusion state, the adolescent individual is heading nowhere positive.
4. **Imitation of Western lifestyle:** adoption of some Western lifestyles may pose dangers to adolescents in Nigeria. Based on social learning effect, frequent reports of adolescents' suicide attempts or cases happening in Europe or America may trigger the feeling of wanting to kill oneself in some adolescents. This typically happens in young people in Nigeria.
5. **Poor rapport between students and their lecturers:** It is insinuated that students often experience poor interpersonal relationships with some of their lecturers. Some lecturers are a source of terror to students. Such lecturers seem unapproachable and pose constantly moody; appearing cold and cruel. Students with this kind of perception about their lecturers may lose interest in certain courses and eventually encounter academic problems, which may lead to a state of depression; a disorder that arouses suicidal thoughts.
6. **Domestic violence:** domestic violence refers to any aggressive behaviour within the home, involving violent abuse on a partner, which often extends to the children of that home. Adolescents who experience serious domestic violence in their homes may develop symptoms of depression and anxiety, either of which can cause suicidal thoughts.

### Signs and Symptoms of Suicidal Thoughts

The following are the most common signs and symptoms of suicidal thoughts (Mayo Clinic, 2022).

1. Talking about suicide — for example, making statements such as *I'm going to kill myself, I wish I were dead or I wish I hadn't been born.*
2. Getting the means to take your own life, such as buying a gun or stockpiling pills.
3. Withdrawing from social contact and wanting to be left alone.
4. Having mood swings, such as being emotionally high one day and deeply discouraged the next.
5. Being preoccupied with death, dying or violence.

6. Feeling trapped or hopeless about a situation.
7. Increasing use of alcohol or drugs.
8. Changing normal routine, including eating or sleeping patterns
9. Doing risky or self-destructive things, such as using drugs or driving recklessly
10. Giving away belongings or getting affairs in order when there's no other logical explanation for doing this
11. Saying goodbye to people as if they won't be seen again
12. Developing personality changes or being severely anxious or agitated, particularly when experiencing some of the warning signs listed above.

### **Implications of Suicidal Thoughts on Adolescents**

The psychosocial implications of suicidal thoughts are highlighted below (Rebound Behavioural Health, 2023; Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023):

1. Severe physical injury
2. Brain damage
3. Brain death
4. Damage to all organ systems
5. Seizures
6. Coma
7. Death

Furthermore, based on observations, suicidal thoughts have the following implications on students:

1. Higher tendencies for neurotic and psychotic behaviours. Neuroticism has to do with emotional instability, while psychotic behaviour is going against norms and values acceptable to one's society.
2. Loss of interest in studies.
3. Withdrawal from academic activities.
4. Academic failure.
5. Increased substance abuse.

### **Conclusion**

It is highly significant in Nigeria for parents, government, tertiary institutions, and all other stakeholders concerned with public mental health matters to pay full attention to populations showing signs and symptoms of suicidal thoughts, who experience such risk factors highlighted by the paper. There are reports making the prevalence of this public mental health issue evident in many tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Thus, there is need for a swift, drastic development of effective measures that can control this phenomenon affecting in adolescents in Nigeria, for they are a high-risk group prone to this particular public mental health issue.

### **Suggestions**

The paper offers suggestions with regard to the highlighted risk-factors for suicidal thoughts, as well its signs and symptoms, and its implications on adolescents in Nigerian tertiary institutions:

1. Establishment of offices where student-lecturer interpersonal relationships are monitored and professionally evaluated through conduct of surveys on the emotionality of lecturers in relation to their students.
2. Continuous e-workshops on how students can evaluate and stabilize their emotions themselves, a way to avoid negative thoughts, substance misuse, violence, etc.
3. Strengthening of guidance and counselling offices in tertiary institutions so that their services are accessible to all students in need of therapy.
4. Government's educational budgets be raised, subsidization of educational programmes be ensured, and curricula be improved so that students emerge self-reliant on graduation.

### References

- Akanni, A.A & Oduaran, C.A (2019). Depression, Self-Esteem and Socio-demographic Determinants of Suicidal Thoughts among University Undergraduates. *Journal of Reviews on Global Economics*, 8, 100-104. Retrieved from <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/njm/article/download/251854/237974>
- Akpunne. B.C., Akinnawo, E.O., Akpunne, S.I, & Kumuyi, D.O (2022). Suicidal Behaviour Among Nigerian Undergraduates: Associations with Gambling Disorder and Emotional Dysregulation. *Health Scope*, 11 (2). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.5812/jhealthscope-121797>.
- Bannink, R., Broeren, S., van de Looij-Jansen, P. M., de Waart, F. G., & Raat, H. (2014). Cyber and traditional bullying victimization as a risk factor for mental health problems and suicidal thoughts in adolescents. *PloS one*, 9 (4). Retrieved from <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0094026>
- Bloch-Elkouby, S., Gorman, B., Lloveras, L., Wilkerson, T., Schuck, A., Barzilay, S., ... & Galynker, I. (2020). How do distal and proximal risk factors combine to predict suicidal thoughts and behaviours? A prospective study of the narrative crisis model of suicide. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 277, 914-926. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S016503272032694X>
- Choi, S. B., Lee, W., Yoon, J. H., Won, J. U., & Kim, D. W. (2017). Risk factors of suicide attempt among people with suicidal thoughts in South Korea: a cross-sectional study. *BMC public health*, 17 (1), 1-11
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2023). Adolescence. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/adolescence>
- Facts about suicide (2023). *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/facts/index.html>
- Kukoyi, O., Orok, E., Oluwafemi, F., Oni, O., Oluwadare, T., Ojo, T., ... Iyamu, D. (2023). Factors influencing suicidal thoughts and self-harm among undergraduate students in a Nigerian private university. *Middle East Current Psychiatry*, 30 (1). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43045-022-00274-1>
- Ladi-Akinyemi T., Okpue, A.P., Onigbinde, O.A., Okafor I.P., Akodu B., & Odeyemi, K.

(2023). Depression and suicidal thoughts among undergraduates in state tertiary institutions in Lagos, Nigeria. *Plos One*, 18 (4). Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0284955>

Muhammad, K. (2021, February 16). Jigawa: Final year student commits suicide over alleged cheating on Valentine's Day. *Daily Post*. Retrieved from <https://dailypost.ng/2021/02/16/jigawa-final-year-student-commits-suicide-over-alleged-cheating-on-valentines-day/>

Lipschitz, D. S., Winegar, R. K., Nicolaou, A. L., Hartnick, E., Wolfson, M., & Southwick, S. M. (1999). Perceived abuse and neglect as risk factors for suicidal behaviour in adolescent inpatients. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 187(1), 32-39. Retrieved from [https://journals.lww.com/jonmd/abstract/1999/01000/perceived\\_abuse\\_and\\_neglect\\_as\\_risk\\_factors\\_for.6.aspx](https://journals.lww.com/jonmd/abstract/1999/01000/perceived_abuse_and_neglect_as_risk_factors_for.6.aspx)

Nigerian university 300-level student commits suicide over financial issues (2023, January 21). *Sahara Reporters*. Retrieved from <https://saharareporters.com/2023/01/21/nigerian-university-futa-300-level-student-commits-suicide-over-financial-issues>

Oginyi, R.C.N, Mbam, O.S., Sampson, N., Chukwudi, E.J., & Nwoba, M.O.E (2018). Personality factors, academic stress and socio-economic status as factors in suicide thoughts among undergraduates of Ebonyi State University. Retrieved from <http://eprints.gouni.edu.ng/1213/1/ofoke%20and%20oginyi%20current%20publicatio%202018.pdf>

Olowuyi, F. (2020, June 23). Suspended Ilaro Poly SUG President drops suicide note. *Campus Reporter*. Retrieved from <https://campusreporter.africa/suspended-ilaro-poly-sug-president-drops-suicide-note/>

Oquendo, M. A., Halberstam, B., & Mann, J. J. (2003). Risk factors for suicidal behaviour. *Standardized evaluation in clinical practice*, 22, 103-129

Causes, signs & effects of suicidal thoughts (2023). *Rebound Behavioural Health*. Retrieved from <https://www.reboundbehaviouralhealth.com/disorders/suicidal-thoughts/symptoms-signs-effects/>

Soloff, P. H., Lynch, K. G., & Kelly, T. M. (2002). Childhood abuse as a risk factor for suicidal behaviour in borderline personality disorder. *Journal of personality disorders*, 16(3), 201-214.

Stemming suicide among students (2021, May 13). *The Nation*. Retrieved from <https://thenationonlineng.net/stemming-suicide-among-students>

Strandheim, A., Bjerkeset, O., Gunnell, D., Bjørnelv, S., Holmen, T. L., & Bentzen, N. (2014). Risk factors for suicidal thoughts in adolescence-a prospective cohort study: the Young-HUNT study. *BMJ open*, 4(8). Retrieved from <https://bmjopen.bmj.com/content/4/8/e005867.short>

Tosin Philip Oyetunji, T.P., Arafat, S. M. Y., Famori, S.O., Akinboyewa, T.B., Michael Afolami, Ajayi, M.A., & Kar, S.K (2021). Suicide in Nigeria: observations from the content analysis of newspapers

World Health Organisation (2017). Suicide data. Retrieved from  
[www.who.int/mental\\_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevention/en/](http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/suicideprevention/en/)

World Population Review. (2019). Suicide rate by country. Retrieved from world  
[populationreview.com/countries/suicide-rate-bycountry/Population](http://populationreview.com/countries/suicide-rate-bycountry/Population).