

Exploring the Differences between Self-Harming and Suicidal Behaviour in Women with Complex Mental Health Needs

Authors : Sophie Oakes-Rogers, Di Bailey, Karen Slade

Abstract : Female offenders are a uniquely vulnerable group, who are at high risk of suicide. Whilst the prevention of self-harm and suicide remains a key global priority, we need to better understand the relationship between these challenging behaviours that constitute a pressing problem, particularly in environments designed to prioritise safety and security. Method choice is unlikely to be random, and is instead influenced by a range of cultural, social, psychological and environmental factors, which change over time and between countries. A key aspect of self-harm and suicide in women receiving forensic care is the lack of free access to methods. At a time where self-harm and suicide rates continue to rise internationally, understanding the role of these influencing factors and the impact of current suicide prevention strategies on the use of near-lethal methods is crucial. This poster presentation will present findings from 25 interviews and 3 focus groups, which enlisted a Participatory Action Research approach to explore the differences between self-harming and suicidal behavior. A key element of this research was using the lived experiences of women receiving forensic care from one forensic pathway in the UK, and the staffs who care for them, to discuss the role of near-lethal self-harm (NLSH). The findings and suggestions from the lived accounts of the women and staff will inform a draft assessment tool, which better assesses the risk of suicide based on the lethality of methods. This tool will be the first of its kind, which specifically captures the needs of women receiving forensic services. Preliminary findings indicate women engage in NLSH for two key reasons and is determined by their history of self-harm. Women who have a history of superficial non-life threatening self-harm appear to engage in NLSH in response to a significant life event such as family bereavement or sentencing. For these women, suicide appears to be a realistic option to overcome their distress. This, however, differs from women who appear to have a lifetime history of NLSH, who engage in such behavior in a bid to overcome the grief and shame associated with historical abuse. NLSH in these women reflects a lifetime of suicidality and indicates they pose the greatest risk of completed suicide. Findings also indicate differences in method selection between forensic provisions. Restriction of means appears to play a role in method selection, and findings suggest it causes method substitution. Implications will be discussed relating to the screening of female forensic patients and improvements to the current suicide prevention strategies.

Keywords : forensic mental health, method substitution, restriction of means, suicide

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