

Counsellors' Experience of Assessing and Managing Suicidality among Students in Third-Level Institutions in Ireland

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Introduction

As the act of killing oneself intentionally (Joiner, 2005), **suicide** is a complex, multifaceted, and contextual phenomenon, which is the **second leading cause of death among college students** worldwide (Moskow et al., 2022).

Focused **research on counsellors' experiences of working with suicidal clients is conspicuously limited'** (Picard & Rosenfield, 2021) and is therefore explored in this study.



Aim & Objectives

To Explore Counsellors' Experience of Assessing and Managing Suicidality Among Students in Third-Level Institutions in Ireland

Objectives

1. Determine whether counsellors feel they have received appropriate professional training to assess and manage suicide risk.
2. Identify and evaluate the suicide risk assessment tools used by counsellors in third-level institutions.
3. Ascertain if risk assessments are standardised.

Methodology

This **qualitative** study utilised semi-structured **interviews** to contextualise **six participants'** lived experience of assessing and managing suicidality among student-clients in their respective Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) approach applied to collect and analyse the data.

NVivo Software Tool used as a second round of analysis.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) **Thematic Analysis** was applied to unpack the IPA.

What Does the Literature Say...

Suicidality among Students & Young People

Ireland: Fourth highest suicide rate of 31 European countries for the 15-19 age group (CFL-HSE, 2020).

Ireland/globally: Risk Factors: History of:

(Dhingra et al., 2019; Horgan et al., 2018).

Professional Suicide Training

30% of college counsellors felt inadequately trained according to Wachter's (2006) research study (Kene et al., 2019).

Lack of suicide training instills anxiety and feelings of professional incompetency (Lund et. al., 2020).

Student Mental Health

Ireland: 7% (approx. 16,500) of students sought the support of Student Counselling Services (PCHEI, 2021).

Ireland/globally: College students experience unique stressors versus age-matched peers (Horgan et al., 2018; Moskow et al., 2022).

Themes & Sub-Themes

Suicide Training	Suicide Risk Assessment	Intervention Strategies	Collaboration	Challenges
1. Clinical Suicide Training 2. Clinical Experience	1. Screening & Risk Assessment 2. CAMS Framework 3. Flexibility in Practice	1. Stabilisation Plan 2. Psychoeducation 3. Referral Mechanism	1. Client-Therapist Collaboration 2. Clinical Team Collaboration	1. What's the Ethical Caseload?

Results

Suicide Training	Use of Evidenced-Based Instruments	Stabilisation Plan	Collaboration
Most participants are trained in the Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality (CAMS) framework. Clinical experience was cited as instilling confidence in assessing for suicide risk.	All participants use evidence-based tools: some implement "full" CAMS, others use aspects of CAMS, interview style assessments and/or psychometric screening instruments. All participants reported clinical judgement and flexibility in their approach as essential. Risk exploration is a meaningful way to listen to clients' experience of suicide.	All participants deem a Stabilisation Plan significant. A 'Good referral mechanism' with specialist services is crucial irrespective of the therapeutic modality used.	A collaborative approach emerged from the participants in terms of the client-therapist relationship and support within their services. Potential Burnout To exclusively work with suicidal clients is 'unwise'/ unethical.

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Discussion

Student Counselling Service **clinicians are in a key position** to appropriately assess suicide risk (Roush et al., 2017) among the student-client population.

Although no single suicide screening or assessment method can predict whether a person will ultimately suicide, **counselling professionals can maximise their efforts in reducing suicide behaviours** by utilising robust evidence-based tools.

HEA supported 300 counsellors' completion of CAMS training (Surdey et al., 2022).

Mixed views on implementing CAMS for short-term counselling.

Studies demonstrate positive outcomes for CAMS in a short-term model (Pistorello et al., 2021).

The provision of a **client-centred approach** is integral to fostering the collaborative and supportive relationship corresponding to clients' interpersonal challenges.

Counsellors face challenges: Some participants were mindful of **potential burnout**.

It is unwise for counsellors to exclusively work with 'at risk' client cases.

Recommendations

1. Introduce evidence-based suicide-specific therapeutic models into **professional training programmes** for clinicians to better equip graduates for such an important phenomenon.
2. **Clear HEI policies** around counsellors 'at risk' client caseload to inform important ethical responsibilities.
3. **Further training** on a national level in other evidence-based practices could further enhance how HEI counsellors work with students in distress.

Future Research

In light of the dearth of enquiry into **university counsellors' experience** of suicide risk assessment and management, **further and extensive research** is clearly needed.

Qualitative studies examining barriers which impede practitioners to use suicide-specific risk assessment and treatment tools in **short-term therapy**.

There is a distinct gap in practitioner ability to predict those most at risk: thus, **theory development** in student suicide is crucial.