

Counsellors' Experience of Assessing & Managing Suicidality among Students in Third- level Institutions in Ireland

Hayley O'Gorman

MSc in Pluralistic Counselling and Psychotherapy



Why this Research Topic?

Suicide is the act of killing oneself intentionally (Joiner, 2005)

Personal Reason:


- Bereaved by Suicide.

Professional Reasons:

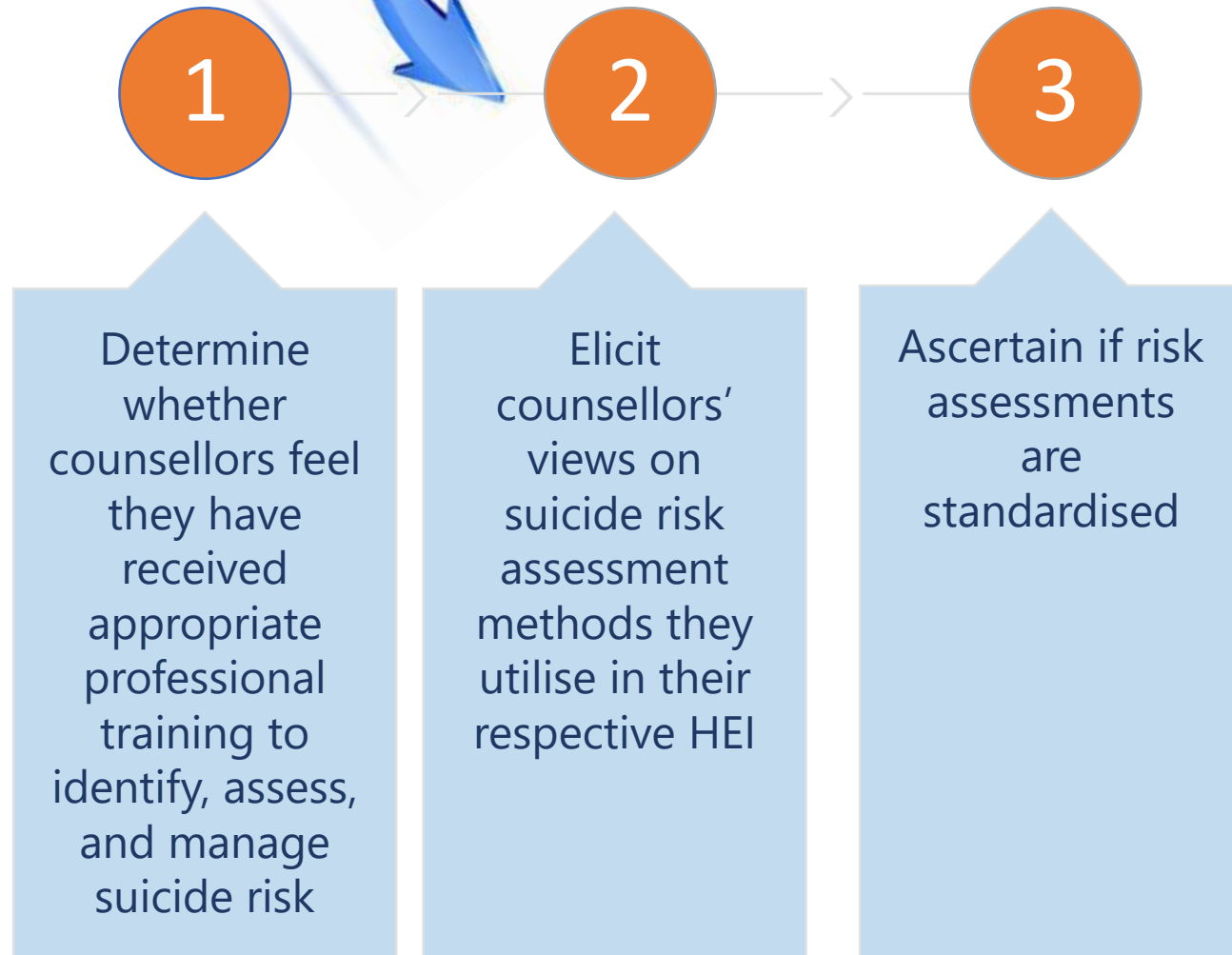
- Clinically practice in a third-level institution.
- Counsellors are uniquely positioned to screen, identify, and assess suicide risk.
- Impact of suicide-specific training.



Aim & Objectives



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





What does the Literature say...

Student Mental Health

- **Ireland:** 7% (approx. 16,500) students sought the support of Student Counselling Services (SCS) (PCHEI 2021).
- **Ireland/globally:** Unique stressors: college students V age-matched peers (Horgan et al., 2018; Moskow et al., 2022).

A silhouette of a person's head and shoulders in profile, facing right, with an open book resting on their lap. The background is dark blue with numerous white and light blue letters and symbols floating around, creating a literary or intellectual atmosphere.

Literature continued...

Suicidality among Students & Young People

- **Globally:** Second leading cause of death among college students (Moskow, Lipson & Tompson, 2022; Wilcox et al., 2010).
- **Ireland/Globally:** Suicide is the 4th leading cause of death among the 15-19 age group (HSE, 2020; WHO, 2021).
- **Ireland:** NRSF - 29% increase in self-harm in 10-24 age group in 10 years (cited in Fox et al., 2020).
- **Ireland/globally:** Risk Factors: History of depression, SI, SB, SP, SA, and hopelessness (Dhingra et al., 2019; Hayes et al., 2020; Horgan et al. 2018).

Suicide Training

- Counsellors' sense of inadequate suicide training is linked to feelings of incompetency and even fear with 'at risk' client presentations (Kene et al., 2019; Lund et al., 2020).
- HEA support counsellors in HEIs in Ireland with training in the Collaborative Assessment & Management of Suicidality (CAMS, Jobes, 2016) (Surdey et al., 2022).

Methodology

- Qualitative Study
- Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)
- Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)
- Six Participants
- Semi-Structured Interviews
- Ethical Considerations
- Methodological Issues (Researcher bias / small sample size)



Preliminary Findings

Superordinate Themes

Suicide Training

**Suicide Screening / Risk
Assessment**

Collaboration

Intervention Strategies

Challenges

Theme 1: Suicide Training

Non-Clinical

- HSE Safe Talk
- Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST)
- START Suicide Prevention training



Clinical-Specific

CAMS

CAMS training completed by most Participants:

P4 described **CAMS** as:

"The most intense training in terms of clinical value in the room".

Suicide Prevention & Self-Harm Mitigation Training completed by **P2** (via STORM)

Adequately Trained

- *"Before CAMS, I would have had to very honestly say no". (P1)*
- *"I don't feel adequately trained. That's not to say I would feel completely incompetent in managing it either". (P6)*

Clinical Experience

Asking direct questions" (P5, P6)... "and I'm not afraid of that". (P5)

Theme 2: Suicide Screening/Risk Assessment

Screening – Psychometric Systems

- The CORE-10 & -34 is a “very useful tool” ...“flags a conversation” (**P3**).
- CCAPS-34 helps to “determine suicidality and determine risk” (**P5**).

Risk Assessment- CAMS

- CAMS is implemented as a “second strategy”– “it is up to individual counsellors” (**P3**). **P5** finds parts of CAMS very useful rather than using it in its “purest form”
- **P4, P1, and P2** “move straight to the CAMS and the stabilisation plan” (**p4**) where a ‘high risk’ level emerges at intake or during therapy.



Theme 3: Collaboration

Client-Therapist Collaboration

P3 highlighted the use of the "core conditions" and holding a "very deep respect of phenomenological inquiry".



Team Collaboration

P5 stated, "it is never a one-person decision, it is always a team decision".



Theme 4: Intervention Strategies

Stabilisation Plan

- *"I think that creates a sense of safety. There is something or someone behind that stabilisation plan" (P2).*



Referral

- Having a "good referral mechanism" (P4) is important (all Ps)



Psychoeducation

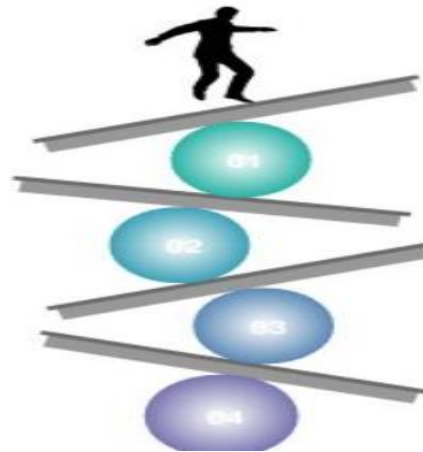
- It is "part of you" not the "whole of you" (P3).



Theme 5: Challenges

Caseload

"How many 'at risk' clients would be inappropriate in a caseload?" (P5) or "how many CAMS clients is ethical on a caseload" (P4).



Discussion

Suicide-Specific Training

- Most participants are fully trained in CAMS.

All participants use evidence-based instruments

- Some participants implement “full”-CAMS, others use aspects of CAMS, and/or psychometric screening tools.
- All participants deem the ‘Stabilisation plan’ significant.
- Risk exploration is a meaningful way to listen to clients’ experience of suicide (Reeves, 2017).

Short-term Model

- Mixed views: implementing a suicide-specific model for short-term counselling. Studies demonstrate positive outcomes (Pistorello et al., 2018, 21).

Potential Burnout

- To exclusively work with suicidal client cases is unwise / unethical.

Implications for Research

- Introduce evidence-based suicide-specific therapeutic models into professional training programmes for clinicians.
- Clear HEI policies around counsellors' 'at risk' client caseload.
- Further training (from PCHEI) on a national level in other evidence-based practices.

Future Research

- Theory development in student suicidality.
- Qualitative studies to examine barriers in utilising suicide risk assessments / frameworks in short-term therapy.

Conclusion

- Students require increasingly flexible yet robust services to meet their unique MH needs (BACP, 2019).
- Suicide-specific training enhances counsellor confidence and competence.
- Effective suicide risk assessment: history /current status of MH, suicidality, access to lethal means, and hopelessness (Jobes, 2016; Picard & Rosenfeld, 2021).
- Opportunity to learn about the client's story and discern how suicide fits into their life.



Acknowledgments

- I am extremely grateful for the support, encouragement, and perspective I received throughout my research process from my supervisor, Delores Crerar.

My thanks also to Dr Noel O'Connor, who was involved from the initial stages of this research. I wish to thank you for your guidance and clarity whenever needed.

- I wish to express my deep gratitude to the six participants who gave time from their extremely busy schedules to share their experiences with such honesty and passion
- Finally, I am thankful to my supportive family, friends, classmates, and study group.





LEARN • GROW • SUCCEED

Thank You!

REFERENCES

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in psychology*, 3(2), 77-101

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2019). A pluralistic approach to student counselling: University and College Counselling. Retrieved from: [A pluralistic approach to student counselling \(bacp.co.uk\)](https://www.bacp.co.uk/pluralistic-approach-to-student-counselling)

Dhingra, K., Boduszek, D., & O'Connor, R. C. (2016). A structural test of the integrated motivational-volitional model of suicidal behaviour. *Psychiatry Research*, 239, 169–178. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2016.03.023>

Fox T, Byrne D, Surdey J (2020). National student mental health and suicide prevention framework. Retrieved from: [HEA – National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework](https://www.hea.ie/national-student-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention-framework)

Hayes, J.A., Petrovich, J., Janis, R. A., Yang, Y., Castonguay, L. G., & Locke, B. D. (2020). Suicide among college students in psychotherapy: Individual Predictors and Latent Classes. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 67(1), 104–114. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000384>

Health Service Executive. (2020). Connecting for Life. Implementation plan 2020-2022. Retrieved from: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/4/mental-health-services/connecting-for-life/publications/cfl-implementation-plan-dec-2020.pdf>

Horgan, A., Kelly, P., Goodwin, J., & Behan, L. (2018). Depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among Irish undergraduate college students. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 39(7), 575–584. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01612840.2017.1422199>

Jobes, D.A. (2016). *Managing suicidal risk: A collective approach (2nd ed.)*. New York: Guilford Press.

Joiner, T.E. (2005). *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Kene, P., Yee, E. T., & Gimmestad, K. D. (2019). Suicide assessment and treatment: Gaps between theory, research, and practice. *Death Studies*, 43(3), 164–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2018.1440034>

Lund, E.M., Schultz, J. C., Thomas, K. B., Nadorff, M. R., Chowdhury, D., & Galbraith, K. (2020). "It's Awful When We Get It Wrong": An exploratory qualitative study of vocational rehabilitation counselors' perspectives on suicide. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, 81(4), 551–566.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0030222818783933>

- Moskow, D.M., Lipson, S. K., & Tompson, M. C. (2022). Anxiety and suicidality in the college student population. *Journal of American College Health, ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2022.2060042>
- PCHEI (2021). Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland (PCHEI) annual statistics. Internal PCHEI statistics. Unpublished.
- [Google ScholarSearch for the full text @ UL Library](#)
- Picard, E.H. & Rosenfeld, B. (2021). How clinicians incorporate suicide risk factors into suicide risk assessment. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention, 42*(2), 100–106. <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000694>
- Pistorello, J., Jobes, D. A., Compton, S. N., Locey, N. S., Walloch, J. C., Gallop, R., Au, J. S., Noose, S. K., Young, M., Johnson, J., Dickens, Y., Chatham, P., Jeffcoat, T., Dalto, G., & Goswami, S. (2018). Developing adaptive treatment strategies to address suicidal risk in college students: a pilot sequential, multiple assignment, randomized trial (SMART). *Archives of Suicide Research, 22*(4), 644–664. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2017.1392915>
- Pistorello, J., Jobes, D. A., Gallop, R., Compton, S. N., Locey, N. S., Au, J. S., Noose, S. K., Walloch, J. C., Johnson, J., Young, M., Dickens, Y., Chatham, P., & Jeffcoat, T. (2021). A randomized controlled trial of the collaborative assessment and management of suicidality (CAMS) versus treatment as usual (TAU) for suicidal college students. *Archives of Suicide Research, 25*(4), 765–789. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2020.1749742>
- Reeves. (2017). In a search for meaning: Challenging the accepted know-how of working with suicide risk. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 45*(5), 606–609. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2017.1377338>
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: theory, method and research*. London: Sage
- Surdey, J., Byrne, D., & Fox, T. (2022). Developing Ireland’s first national student mental health and suicide prevention framework for higher education. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine, 1*–5. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2022.10>
- Wilcox, H. C., Arria, A. M., Caldeira, K. M., Vincent, K. B., Pinchevsky, G. M., & O’Grady, K. E. (2010). Prevalence and predictors of persistent suicide ideation, plans, and attempts during college. *Journal of Affective Disorders, 127*(1), 287–294
- World Health Organization. (June 2021). Suicide worldwide in 2019: Global health estimates. Geneva: Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO. Retrieved: [Suicide worldwide in 2019 \(who.int\)](#)