CORRESPONDENCE

The Management of Psychiatric Emergencies

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Self-harming Behavior or Suicidal Intent

Mavrogiorgou et al (1) discussed the medical-therapeutic approach in psychiatric emergencies. However, in order to distinguish between suicidal and self-harming behavior in terms of differential diagnostic evaluation, some recent evidence should be added (2). “Self-harming behavior” refers to direct, self-inflicted harm to one’s own body without suicidal intent (3). In attempted suicide, it is understood that this act aims to end intolerable psychological suffering by one’s own death. Self-harming behavior, on the other hand, aims to reduce painful emotional states.

Brown et al. (4) compared self-harming behavior and attempted suicides and found that adult patients with borderline disorders use self-harming behaviors in order to distract from problems, express anger, and trigger positive feelings. Therefore, self-harming behavior aims to provide temporary relief whereas the predominant motive of attempted suicide is “to make others better off”.

Attempted suicide and self-harming behavior differ in terms of the emotions that the intended action aims to deal with. Self-harming behavior mainly aims to regulate acute and upsetting arousal affects (anger, frustration, fear). Suicide attempts, on the other hand, are favored by sustained emotions at a low level of arousal (loneliness, hopelessness).

Self-harming behavior is accompanied by mild forms of injuries (cutting, hitting oneself, etc). By contrast, suicide attempts often result in severe forms of injuries (overdose, use of firearms, etc). As a rule, patients with self-harming behavior have less serious injuries and a higher number of already inflicted self-injuries than patients with suicidal intent. The crucial difference is the emotional state preceding the act (acutely occurring emotions at a high level of arousal versus sustained emotions at a low level of arousal).

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Conflict of interest statement

The author declares that no conflict of interest exists.

The authors of the article have chosen not to publish a reply.