

## Abstract

Thoughts of death or suicidal ideation are common in young people aged 12 - 30 years presenting for mental health care.

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### Background

Reducing suicidal behaviour is a major public health goal. Expanding access to care has been identified as a key strategy. In Australia, a national network of primary-care based services (*headspace*) has been established for young people with mental ill-health. This study determines the socio-demographic, psychopathological and illness-stage correlates of suicidal ideation in young persons attending *headspace* services.

### Methods

Suicidal ideation was recorded using the specific suicide item of the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HDRS) in a cohort of subjects aged 12-30 years (N = 494) attending *headspace* services.

### Results

Of the 494 young persons assessed, 32% (158/494) had a positive response to any level of the HDRS suicide item, consisting of 16% (77/494) reporting that life was not worth living and a further 16% (81/494) reported thoughts of death or suicidal ideation. Young women (19%; 94/494) were more likely to report any positive response as compared with young men (13%; 64/494) [ $\chi^2(2,494) = 13.6, p < .01$ ]. Those with 'attenuated syndromes' reported positive responses at rates comparable to those with more established disorders (35% vs. 34%;  $\chi^2(1,347) = 0.0, p = 0.87$ ). However, more serious levels of suicidal ideation were more common in those with depressive disorders or later stages of illness. In multivariate analyses, the major predictors of the degree of suicidal ideation were increasing levels of clinician-rated depressive symptoms (beta = 0.595,  $p < .001$ ), general psychopathology (beta = 0.198,  $p < .01$ ), and self-reported distress (beta = 0.172,  $p < .05$ ).

### Conclusions

Feelings that life is not worth living, thoughts of death or suicidal ideation are common in young people seeking mental health care. These at-risk cognitions are evident before many of these individuals develop severe or persistent mental disorders. Thoughts of death or suicidal ideation may well need to be a primary intervention target in these young people.

**Keywords:** Suicide; Clinical staging; Psychiatric; Youth

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