Victimization, Suicidal Ideation, and Alcohol Use From Age 13 to 15 Years: Support for the Self-Medication Model

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Purpose: Recent years have seen increased coverage of adolescent victimization and suicide. Both adolescent peer victimization and substance use have been associated with suicidal ideation, with evidence suggesting that all three factors are interrelated. There are at least four models which can explain the associations between these factors (i.e., self-medication, secondary mental disorder, bi-directional, and common factor). However, none of them is being empirically supported as the dominant model because few longitudinal studies have explored the association between these factors.

Methods: The present study compared longitudinal paths of all four models simultaneously using a cross-lagged model. This was done using self-reported measures of peer victimization, suicidal ideation, and alcohol use at age 13, 14, and 15 years in a longitudinal sample of 238 adolescents.

Results: All three variables were moderately stable across time. Significant cross-lagged associations were found, showing that frequent peer victimization at age 13 years was associated with higher odds of having suicidal ideation at age 14 years (odds ratio, 1.82; p < .05). In turn, presence of suicidal ideation at age 14 years was significantly associated with higher alcohol use frequency at age 15 years (β = .13; p < .05).

Conclusions: Results support previous literature suggesting that peer victimization predates alcohol use and extends it by showing clear directionality between suicidal ideation and alcohol use over 1 year, supporting the self-medication model. Clarifying the empirical basis of these underlying models could allow for earlier prevention strategies, by targeting the risk factor that appears the earliest in the model.

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Recent years have seen increased media coverage of adolescent victimization and suicide and research identifying them as significant public health concerns [1]. For example, peer victimization and suicidal ideation or behaviors have each been shown to be longitudinally associated with later substance use [2–5]. Although available studies have mostly documented the associations between pairs of the following factors: peer victimization and suicide ideation or behavior, peer victimization and substance use, or suicide ideation or behavior and substance use, the literature suggests that all three factors (i.e., peer victimization, suicide ideation or behavior, and substance use) are inter-related. Indeed, one cross-sectional study of U.S. adolescents aged 12–18 years has shown that this is the case [6]. However, the developmental direction of associations between pairs of factors, let alone between the three factors, has not been examined systematically. Clarifying that direction and developmental sequence is important to guide prevention efforts.

There are at least four theoretical models that may explain the longitudinal associations between these factors and help organize our literature review: (1) the secondary substance use disorder model (the self-medication model), (2) the secondary mental disorder model, (3) the bidirectional model, and (4) the common factor model. In the context of our study, the self-medication model states that victimization could lead to suicidal ideation, which in turn would lead to alcohol use as a way to help cope with, or self-medicate, negative feelings [7]. The secondary mental disorder model states that victimization would lead to alcohol use which would result in greater risk of suicide ideation through an increase in maladaptive coping strategies and psychological distress [8]. The bidirectional model implies that all three factors (i.e., alcohol use, peer victimization, and suicide ideation) have reciprocal effects on one another contributing to an increase in overall problematic behavior and symptomology over time [9]. Finally, the common factor model states that there are one or more factors (e.g., peer victimization) which are responsible for increased risk of developing multiple disorders (e.g., alcohol use and suicide ideation) [9]. For a graphical representation of the four models, see Figure 1. The following three sections summarize the developmental literature on pairs of these three behaviors. Although our analyses focus on suicidal ideation, this review will also include studies on suicidal behaviors because both are strongly associated and the literature on this subject in adolescence is sparse.

Peer victimization and suicidal ideation and behavior

Most studies that have examined the link between peer victimization and suicide ideation or behavior are cross-sectional and found greater association of suicide ideation and attempts in adolescents who reported being bullied or victimized. For a comprehensive review on the subject, see the study by Kim and Leventhal [10].
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