

**Suicide in adolescence: nursing care in times of pandemic***Suicidio en la adolescencia: cuidados de enfermería en tiempos de pandemia**Suicídio na adolescência: cuidados de enfermagem em tempos de pandemia***Aline Voltarelli<sup>1\*</sup>**

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Suicide is the leading cause of death among adolescents and young people worldwide and is considered a public health problem. This study aimed to understand the role of nurses in the face of suicidal ideation in adolescence. The specific objectives were to conceptualize suicide and associated factors, contextualize suicide in adolescence, and discuss nursing interventions to prevent suicide in adolescents. This is a literature review study. For data collection, studies were selected from the Virtual Health Library, published between 2018 and 2022, using the descriptors: "Nurse", "Suicide", "Prevention" and "Public Health". The suicidal person has great suffering in their psychic structure, and they do not feel the strength to bear it, seeing death as the only option to end this problem. The care provided by the nurse must be unhurried, with the possibility of requesting the presence of a family member and developing dialogue in a way that reflects trust between professional and patient.

**Descriptors:** Adolescence; Nursing; Suicide; Public Health; COVID-19.**How to cite this article:**

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## Resumén

El suicidio es la principal causa de muerte entre adolescentes y jóvenes en todo el mundo y se considera un problema de salud pública. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo comprender el papel del enfermero frente a la ideación suicida en la adolescencia. Los objetivos específicos fueron: conceptualizar el suicidio y sus factores asociados, contextualizar el suicidio en la adolescencia y discutir la intervención de enfermería con vistas a la prevención del suicidio en adolescentes. Este es un estudio de revisión de la literatura. Para la recolección de datos se seleccionaron estudios de la Biblioteca Virtual en Salud, publicados entre 2018 y 2022, utilizando los descriptores: "Enfermera", "Suicidio", "Prevención" y "Salud Pública". La persona suicida tiene un gran sufrimiento en su estructura psíquica, y no siente fuerzas para soportarlo, viendo la muerte como la única opción para acabar con este problema. El cuidado brindado por la enfermera debe ser pausado, con la posibilidad de solicitar la presencia de un familiar, y desarrollar el diálogo de manera que refleje confianza entre profesional y paciente.

**Descriptores:** Adolescencia; Enfermería; Suicidio; Salud Pública; COVID-19.

## Resumo

O suicídio é a principal causa de morte entre adolescentes e jovens no mundo e é considerado um problema de saúde pública. Este estudo objetivou compreender a atuação do enfermeiro diante da ideação suicida na adolescência. Os objetivos específicos foram: conceituar o suicídio e fatores associados, contextualizar o suicídio na adolescência e discorrer sobre a intervenção da enfermagem com vistas à prevenção do suicídio em adolescentes. Trata-se de um estudo de revisão da literatura. Para coleta de dados foram selecionados estudos da Biblioteca Virtual de Saúde, publicados no período de 2018 a 2022, utilizando os descritores: "Enfermeiro", "Suicídio", "Prevenção" e "Saúde Pública". O suicida tem em sua estrutura psíquica um grande sofrimento, sendo que este não sente forças para suportá-lo, enxergando a morte como única opção para acabar com esse problema. O atendimento realizado pelo enfermeiro deverá ser sem pressa, podendo solicitar a presença de um familiar, e desenvolvendo diálogo de forma que reflita a confiança entre profissional e o paciente.

**Descritores:** Adolescência; Enfermagem; Suicídio; Saúde Pública; COVID-19.

## Introduction

Suicide in young people includes a high degree of morbidity and mortality and represents a serious public health issue. The scientific importance of depression in this period of life is also quite recent, suicide attempts have represented a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which may result from a combination of social factors<sup>1</sup>.

Current diagnostic classifications indicate that the main symptoms of depressive symptoms on a larger scale are commonly the same in adolescents and adults. At this point, researchers point out the value of the maturation process in the symptomatologic form of depression, with fundamental properties in each period of growth<sup>2</sup>.

Depressive problems have a high and growing prevalence in the general population, and sufficient scientific evidence is found establishing depression among the most common, harmful diseases that result in greater social costs, representing one of the most relevant cases in public health, with effects at all levels of society<sup>3</sup>.

The relevance of this study is due to the importance of professional nurses' guidance towards adolescents to prevent suicide. Therefore, this study is justified due to the increase in cases of suicide in adolescents, as it is a public health problem and, concerning nursing performance, in this context, is of utmost importance mainly in the contribution of prevention to suicide. The guiding question was: "How can nurses intervene in situations of suicidal ideation presented in adolescents?".

The general objective was to understand the role of nurses in the face of suicidal ideation in adolescents in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. The specific objectives were to conceptualize suicide and associated factors, contextualize suicide in adolescence, and discuss nursing intervention to prevent suicide in adolescents in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Methodology

This was a literature review study. For data collection, data were extracted from the Virtual Health Library (VHL), with scientific articles published between 2018 and 2022. The inclusion criteria were articles relevant to the research topic and in Portuguese and English. Exclusion criteria: articles not available free of charge and in full text and that did not address the theme established for the study in question. The descriptors used in this health research were: "Nurse", "Adolescence", "Suicide", "Prevention", "Public Health" and "COVID-19". The search strategy combined the descriptors listed with the Boolean operators "AND" and "OR".

## Results and Discussion

### Conceptualization of adolescence and suicide

During adolescence, the vision of oneself and others becomes tainted by intense emotions, which makes it difficult to ask for and accept help from others around you<sup>3</sup>.



The view that the best solution is to end one's own life, then the individual can begin to plan how they will commit suicidal acts. If this psychological suffering becomes more intense and no other solution is available, the expression and execution of suicidal ideas may occur, increasing the risk of this act being successful. The convinced thought of death and the attempt to commit suicide alert to the urgent need for help and professionals who can guide the subject to find other solutions that enable them to react in favor of life<sup>2-4</sup>.

When it comes to knowing how to deal with life's experiences, it can be said that teenagers have less ability to deal with these transformations and experiences at this stage of life, in which, in their view, they have little space and time to resolve them. Their psychology is vulnerable, like that of a child, which makes them more susceptible to the impact of this new world, such as life changes, decreased emotional ties, grief, changes, and violence<sup>3,4</sup>.

Their difficulty in expressing what they feel in words can prevent this individual from asking for help in situations that increase this suffering. In this way, the impulse comes and gives rise to the act of committing suicide without thinking. Without discerning the best path given what you are experiencing externally, the solution could be suicide to end the conflicts and adversities in your life<sup>5</sup>.

Concerning the individual's life, when since childhood emotional development is marked by a lack of affection on the part of those who care for them or by acts of violence, it appears that there is a tendency to develop poor self-esteem and difficulty in loving others. itself, becoming more vulnerable in different situations. On the other hand, not setting limits for children does not help them to live with the problems (frustrations) that they can experience, as unbearable, since they cannot develop ways to deal with them<sup>4,5</sup>.

Adolescence is a time of great changes in the body, mind, and relationships with those around them. The teenager has to be able to deal with the loss of childhood stereotypes, the emergence of sexuality, the new vision of the role of parents, and the gradual entry into adulthood. All of this highlights a phase of crisis in which the adolescent is vulnerable and different experiences can be lived more intensely. Choosing a future professional at this stage further intensifies this vulnerability of not being loved by your caregivers, putting at risk the ability to absorb the action of love received from others, marking this vulnerability<sup>6</sup>.

The beginning of the formation of their image happens in childhood when the baby interacts with their guardians. One can consider thinking about failures in these moments, which can lead to the formation of gaps that can become more evident in later life situations that challenge that person. Having a mother who is depressed or highly unstable, for example, makes her relationship with her baby difficult and leads the child to form a degraded image of a worthless person<sup>4,6</sup>.

The World Health Organization (WHO) points out that the following two decades will see a transformation in the health needs of the world's population since illnesses, such as depression, are slightly accounting for the popular

issues of infectious diseases and malnutrition. The loss caused by diseases, assessed by Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALY), shows that major depression, the fourth cause of being overweight in 1990, will be the second cause in 2020, second only to ischemic heart disease, especially if we analyze that the development Depression clinic is usually considered due to relapses and chronicity, being able to determine a clear concept of the power and severity of this pathology in the general population<sup>7,8</sup>.

The term suicide was applied for the first time in 1737, whose Latin origin means "Sui = Oneself and Caederes = Action of killing", which is an act that consists of putting an end to one's life. For depression to evolve, a starting point or trigger is necessary, such as the death of a loved one, unrequited love, aggression in childhood, or sexual violence, worldwide studies present bullying as one of the main causes of suicide among children and adolescents, being the third biggest cause of mortality in the world and second only of traffic accidents and homicides<sup>9</sup>.

Major depression in adolescence is currently considered to be common and was officially recognized by the US National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) in 1975. Major depression in adolescence is more severe and pernicious than in adults, and its Course is more refractory than in adult-onset depression. Depression in adolescents appears to be more frequent and occurs earlier and earlier<sup>7,9</sup>.

The various forms of violence, such as bullying, sexual or verbal violence, and rape, are experienced by adolescents, generating trauma that affects their self-esteem, and causing serious scars, that the subject must live with. In this sense, violence affects self-image when carrying out the suicide process. The experience of these traumas as humiliation can reopen old wounds and lead to a degraded perception of self, which makes possible and more evident the possibility of self-harm, mutilation, and attempted suicide<sup>6</sup>.

The prevalence of depression is low until the age of nine, increasing sharply from nine to nineteen years of age, especially in girls. Around the age of thirteen to fourteen, girls begin to show higher rates of depression than boys, and after the age of fifteen, girls are twice as affected<sup>8</sup>.

These data therefore indicate that depression rates increase considerably in adolescence, with rates and gender distribution (female predominance) like those in adults. In a recent review on the epidemiology of depressive disorders in community samples of adolescents, it was observed that the results and methodology used in the research articles present many differences<sup>9,10</sup>.

Situations of degradation that can take on great dimensions today, in which media are increasingly used to intensify insults. Situations in which one is humiliated and violent can increase these moments of depression, loneliness, and separation from others and trigger a suicide process in vulnerable people.

The suicidal person has great psychological suffering, and he does not feel the strength to bear it, he sees death as the only option to end this problem. The mental processes that are linked to suicide are severe



depression, feelings of despair, hatred of oneself and others, anger, and anxiety, linked to an image without any quality, in which he directs his aggression towards himself. In the context of developing programs to promote problem-solving strategies and self-esteem, scientific evidence confirms that adolescents have an active stance and, when looking for close friends, present physical well-being as they seek this help with guidance. professional<sup>3,4,6,9</sup>.

Multidisciplinary teams that work directly with adolescents, whether in education or health services, must be trained to work with this age group, thus avoiding the pursuit of voluntary death by adolescents<sup>11</sup>.

### Suicide in adolescence

With the increase in the prevalence of mortality from external causes among young people and specifically self-extermination, a negative impact can be seen on the job market, on the future of one's professional career, on family organization, in addition to the increase in health spending on hospital treatment, rehabilitation, and social insertion. In some cases, the attempt at self-extermination may leave irrecoverable consequences, compromising the daily life of the person and their family members, impacting family and social disruption.

It is emphasized that professional nurses have poor initial and ongoing training in mental health, making care essentially technical. Three other authors analyzed cited the importance of professional qualification and training, both initial and through continuing education, to ensure quality care for patients<sup>2</sup>.

However, these professionals need to be prepared and qualified for this type of approach. These aspects must be reinforced, especially during the Undergraduate Nursing Course. In-hospital programs should also be carried out, where this topic can be addressed and discussed to break taboos and minimize discrimination<sup>2,11</sup>.

Nursing professionals have low specific educational exposure regarding the topic of suicide. However, education related to suicide prevention offered to health professionals can improve the attitudes of these individuals regarding the preventability of suicide, the clarity of their role, confidence, and more preventive attitudes towards suicide<sup>12</sup>.

Emergency services are gateways to care for risk and attempted suicide, requiring preparation from the multidisciplinary team and an environment that facilitates observation of the situation and treatment of health problems. Therefore, the topic must be discussed in permanent education spaces or informal moments in everyday work, as suicide is permeated by myths, fears, prejudices, discomfort, and condemnatory attitudes, leading to the silence surrounding the problem<sup>12,13</sup>.

The preparation of professionals to manage suicide is not limited to training, as professionals are also emotionally affected when providing care and may experience a feeling of professional failure, reduced self-esteem, and questioning their professional skills and competencies. The knowledge, practices, and emotional reactions of professionals are related when it comes to suicidal behavior. The deficit in training can contribute to the

emotional discomfort experienced by the team, in addition to limiting the repertoire of strategies for dealing with at-risk patients.

Greater effectiveness in the management of suicidal patients would lead to a reduction in morbidity and mortality rates due to suicide and the essential element to achieve this is through training on suicidal behavior, as having a greater degree of training in mental health and a high level of emotional intelligence is associated with a more positive attitude towards the patient with this behavior. The training and development of emotional skills are essential for the care of patients with suicidal behavior<sup>12,13</sup>.

The evidence-based, fast, humanized, and effective approach can be decisive for the patient's prognosis. To achieve this, professionals need to be prepared and supported. Only by knowing the various factors involved in the search for death can the professional nurse be able to provide humanized care to the patient, not only taking care of their biological needs but also helping to alleviate the psychological suffering present in these cases. The nurse's conduct in caring for a patient who has attempted suicide must be based on listening and welcoming the patient, by the professional, providing humanized care to both the client and the family<sup>12,14</sup>.

The emergency service plays an important role in the intervention and prevention of suicide, as patients who have attempted suicide are vulnerable to further attempts. Therefore, it is important to establish interpersonal bonds with the patient, through the professional helping relationship and their family and social ties. Nursing performance is the skills peculiar to nursing that concerns a humanistic and scientific profession, centered on human care and activities that aim to assist, support, facilitate, or enable individuals or groups to maintain or regain their well-being through culturally significant care actions, as well as helping people face their physical or psychological limitations<sup>11,12,14</sup>.

Prevention takes place with acceptance, with attention, with being there. Favoring the person to express all their suffering, feelings, and thoughts. This happens with loving listening, calmly and delicately. The emergency service nurse is often the patient's first contact with the healthcare system after a suicide attempt or self-harm episode. Appropriate assessment and management of these patients is critical to preventing future suicidal behavior.

It is up to the nurse, however, during a helping relationship, to be attentive and aware of the message that the patient transmits, avoiding early and unnecessary interventions, which could act as blocks to communication. Adolescents who have attempted suicide, as with all ages, must be welcomed and their suffering must be understood and respected by all health professionals. The nursing professional is fundamental during the therapeutic process and must seek to establish a therapeutic relationship with the patient, a relationship of trust, listen to the patient without making value judgments, and allow the patient to reconstruct the meanings of their suffering and conflicts<sup>11,13</sup>.

The nurse's ethical attitude based on morality and deontology proves to be extremely important when



providing dignified, respectful care, free from stigmas, beliefs, and prejudices. Centered on interaction, this care aims to create a helping relationship, a therapeutic interaction, which is characterized by any contact with the person who needs help, to meet a demand. In care, there is a helping relationship that involves giving part of your time, skills, knowledge, interest, and ability to listen and understand what the other person expresses and their feelings<sup>12,13</sup>.

The individual needs to have an emotional connection so that they can report their thoughts, and from there they can be helped, but to do so, the concern of nurses regarding the mental conditions of their patients' needs to precede any action, making them create bonds that will help in observation. With greater humanization and involvement of the nursing team in response to individual needs and the development of therapeutic strategies focused on listening and observation, it will be possible to improve individual care in its entirety and prevent suicide<sup>12,13</sup>.

### **Nursing interventions in preventing suicide in adolescents in times of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Humanization is understood as a measure that seeks to rescue respect for human life on ethical, psychological, and social occasions, within human relationships and that accepts the need to rescue biological, physiological, and subjective aspects<sup>12</sup>.

In times of the pandemic, care could not, therefore, be provided to the patient in the most humanized way possible in a holistic way, that is, treating them, but in a singular way, highlighting that the year 2020 was marked in Brazil by the arrival of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes the disease classified as COVID-19<sup>14</sup>.

It is necessary to understand the request for help through a suicide attempt is extremely important, as many of these individuals have been suffering or harboring suffering for years or have even developed a pathology such as depression and do not know how to act or even do not know how to act. how to seek help, and for this reason they try self-examination to alleviate the suffering<sup>5</sup>.

The nurse must work together with the multidisciplinary team, providing comprehensive care to the patient, for greater effectiveness of care and greater prevention of other suicide attempts. The sum of knowledge from different professional areas in the act of caring contributes to the way it is approached integrally, guaranteeing efficient care, promotion, and prevention of life. Comprehensive care has as its constituent components the relationship of intersubjectivity, listening to subjects, and welcoming. Listening to subjects and the relationship of intersubjectivity with reception are constituent components inherent to comprehensiveness and care cannot be limited to technical skills alone<sup>14</sup>.

Care for individuals in psychological distress must go beyond checking signs and symptoms and administering medications. This individual must be fully assisted, as is his right, and, for this, the work of an interdisciplinary team, coordinated with other services, is necessary<sup>6,12</sup>.

A importância do enfermeiro emergencista reconhecer os sinais e sintomas de intoxicação exógena para a sobrevivência do paciente. Os enfermeiros executam avaliações clínicas, procedimentos invasivos e cuidados, que tendem a reduzir os danos provocados pelo próprio paciente até serem remanejados para clínicas especializadas<sup>11</sup>.

Due to its worrying mortality rate and the need for patients affected by the disease COVID-19 to be treated differently, to preserve lives and help reduce the high risk of contagion, with harmful consequences for society, the role of nursing in health education becomes fundamental in terms of the care necessary for those involved. It is inferred that, when there is a potential for suicide, it is important not to leave the young person alone, as they need to be accompanied daily. The work of therapeutic companions or hospitalization in specialized institutions can be important<sup>4,14</sup>.

It is essential to expand the support system, in the search for help for the family in the understanding that the individual who causes or commits suicide may not want to die, but rather live in another way. The psychologist needs to work together with a multidisciplinary team. According to the Ministry of Health's Suicide Prevention Manual, approximately ⅓ of people with a depressive episode improve with their first antidepressant. It usually takes about two weeks for antidepressants to take effect. Eight weeks are essential to get back to your pre-depression mood. When symptoms remit, it is recommended to continue treatment in the maintenance phase. The treatment carried out by the psychologist lasts a minimum of six months, starting from complete remission of symptoms. If depression recurs, and if it is severe, treatment takes at least two years for the rest of your life. When an individual enters the hospital unit because of a suicide attempt, the healthcare professional's first step must be to understand that such an act is the result of a series of factors that are disorganized in the patient's life<sup>7,8,12,14</sup>.

The objective of the first contact with the individual who has engaged in suicidal behavior is to collect information about the patient's life and the reasons that led him to such behavior. The patient who attempts suicide has their first contact with the nurse upon arriving at the emergency unit and the nurse must be fully trained to recognize the signs and symptoms of exogenous intoxication and initiate interventions immediately for the patient's effective recovery, as well as talk to the family to gather information and inform about treatment<sup>11,13</sup>.

The nurse must also interact with the multidisciplinary team to offer comprehensive and more effective care in preventing other suicide attempts. The patient who has attempted suicide will be able to make new attempts within the hospital. Therefore, the preventive behavior of professionals is considered an important safety measure in the management of suicidal individuals. To this end, team preparation and attention as well as the identification and removal of risk factors and patient protection are some basic procedures to be adopted by professionals<sup>11,13</sup>.



## Conclusion

Suicide is the intentional act of killing oneself and is seen as violence and aggressiveness, not choosing social space, ethnicity, financial situation, or gender. It is a major public health problem, and each case is a tragedy that affects families, communities, and entire countries, which can leave irrecoverable consequences in the person's daily life and family environment.

The guiding question is considered answered since the results acquired in the data analysis pointed to the role of nurses in assisting patients who attempted suicide, affirming the importance of this professional in assisting these patients.

Nursing work is related to the skills peculiar to the humanistic and scientific profession that assists with

sensitivity and delicacy, but also with the technique and dexterity necessary for care. Taking this statement into account, the qualification and training of these professionals must be paramount to develop care with the suicidal patient, as the professional's exhaustion is greater as it involves a load of feelings and emotions contrary to the objective of the profession, which is to maintain and recover life.

Therefore, it is important to support these professionals with group therapy and training through continuing education. Young people also need help to decode information that comes over the Internet, as without such mediation, one can fall into the trap of an unlimited threat, with no means of confronting it and, on this journey, guidance and care with humanization are extremely important.

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