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An Investigation of Suicidal Behaviours and Self-Harm in Adults with ADHD in Ireland

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Connecting for Life

PROJECT TITLE

An Investigation of Suicidal Behaviours and Self-Harm in Adults with ADHD in Ireland.

KEY MESSAGES

- Adults with ADHD in Ireland were invited to take part in a survey using standardised suicidal behaviour and self-harm questionnaires.
- Results showed one in five adults with ADHD reported having made a suicide attempt and a further 61% experienced suicidal ideation.
- 50% of adults with ADHD had self-harmed.
- Need to raise awareness of possible ADHD in those presenting with suicidal behaviour and self-harm.

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CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is the most common childhood psychiatric condition affecting up to 5-7% of children (Polanczyk et al., 2014). Its core symptoms are inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. It is now increasingly acknowledged that for a significant majority of children the disorder persists into adulthood, and there are many more adults who had undiagnosed ADHD in childhood. The prevalence rate of ADHD is 2.5% of the adult population (Faraone et al, 2021).

The risk of suicide is up to four times higher for people with ADHD, (Furczyk & Thome, 2014). Certain co-morbidities associated with ADHD may also predispose an individual to risk of suicidal behaviours and self-harm (e.g. depression, alcohol/substance use, emotional dysregulation). As such, it is important to consider both core symptoms and co-morbidities as risk factors for suicidal behaviours and self-harm in adults with ADHD in Ireland. It is both timely and imperative to conduct this investigation as the HSE National Clinical Programme for ADHD in Adults (NCPAA) develops services for this cohort. The NCPAA Programme is being delivered as part of the HSE's mental health service provision and across government departments to ensure a holistic, integrated, person-centred response to adults with ADHD.

AIM/OBJECTIVE(S)

Aim: The main aim of this research is to examine the risk of suicide and self-harm for adults with ADHD, as well as recognise potential predictors to inform future prevention strategies.

Objectives: There are two objectives:

1) To characterise the adult ADHD population in Ireland in terms of suicidal behaviour and self-harm.

2) To investigate possible correlates of suicidal behaviour and self-harm with regard to a) ADHD symptoms and b) co-morbidities (i.e. depression, anxiety, emotion dysregulation, substance use).

METHODOLOGY

An online survey was emailed to adults aged 18 years and over with ADHD registered with ADHD-Ireland and the link was also posted on Adult ADHD support Facebook pages. The survey involved completing standardised questionnaires that asked about suicidal behaviours and deliberate self-harm, as well as ADHD symptoms (i.e. inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity), depression symptoms, emotional dysregulation symptom, alcohol and substance use. The following measures were used;

i) **Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale** (Adler et al, 2006)

The Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS) is an 18-item self-report questionnaire assessing the degree to which symptoms of ADHD are present over the past 6 months and in prior research, has demonstrated good internal consistency (α = 0.88; Adler et al., 2006), sensitivity and specificity (Kessler et al., 2005), and convergent validity (Adler et al., 2006). Items are ranked on a 5-point Likert scale and dichotomized in scoring to indicate the presence or absence of a symptom.

ii) **Suicidal Behaviours Questionnaire-Revised** (SBQ-R; Osman et al., 1999)

The SBQ-R is a four items scale examining lifetime suicide ideation and/or attempt, the frequency of ideation over the past 12 months, the threat of suicide attempt and self-reported likelihood of suicidal behaviour in the future. The SBQ-R has been shown to be an effective measure in differentiating between general population participants who are at risk and not at risk of attempting suicide (Osman et al., 2001).

iii) **Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory** (DSHI; Gratz, 2001)

The DSHI is a 17-item, behaviourally based, self-report questionnaire to assess self-harm. The participant is asked if they have ever intentionally cut their wrist, arms or other area(s) on their body (without intending to kill themselves). If they respond yes, they are asked follow-up questions on the nature of their self-harm (e.g. when it started, frequency). They are also presented with a list of self-harm behaviours to indicate what behaviours they have engaged in. The DSHI has demonstrated high consistency and validity (Fliege et al., 2006; Gratz, 2001; Vigfusdottir et al., 2020). It has also been used in a previous study on adults with ADHD symptomatology and self-harm, suicidal ideation and behaviours (Taylor et al., 2014).

Iv) **Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale Short Form (DERS-SF)** (Kaufman et al, 2016)

The DERS is an 18-item scale which asks participants how often each statement applies to them on a Likert scale from 0-10% (almost never) to 91-100% (almost always). It can be divided into six subscales which are scored so that higher values reflect greater difficulty with emotion regulation. It has been validated against the long-form which has been shown to be reliable and valid with both adolescents and adults (DERS; Gratz & Roemer, 2004) and has excellent psychometric properties (Kaufman et al, 2016).

v) **Anxiety and depression subscale scores of the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale** (HADS; Zigmond & Snaith, 1983).

This is a widely used 14-item self-report questionnaire that divides into two subscales that measure anxiety and depression respectively. Two reviews of the HADS support it for the purposes of clinical screening for both severity and case detection of anxiety disorders and depression (Bjelland, Dahl, Haug, & Neckelmann, 2002; Herrmann, 1997). It has been reported to be reliable in relevant clinical groups including those with a psychiatric history, in primary care, and in the general population (Bjelland et al., 2002; Snaith & Zigmond, 1994).

vi) **Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test** (ASSIST, World Health Organisation, 2002)

ASSIST screens for all levels of problem or risky substance use in adults. It consists of eight questions covering tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine-type stimulants (including ecstasy) inhalants, sedatives, hallucinogens, opioids and 'other drugs'. A risk score is provided for each substance, and scores are grouped into 'low risk', 'moderate risk' or 'high risk'. It has been used in several studies assessing risk and correlates of alcohol and substance use for adults with ADHD (e.g. Busch et al., 2019).

Unfortunately as the survey was anonymous, it was not possible to follow-up those who reported possible future suicide attempts. However, details were given of support services and advice options available. Participants were also warned of the sensitive nature of the study before they began completing the survey.

RESULTS / FINDINGS

- 136 participants (79 women; 52 men; 5 non-binary) with ADHD completed the survey with mean age 39 years (range 18-71 years).
- 90% had been diagnosed with ADHD in adulthood.
- 78% had third level education. 70% were employed, 13% were students, 17% were unemployed.
- Given that the participants were self-selected and volunteered to do the survey, this may have led to a biased sample and reduce the generalizability of the findings.

Suicidal behaviours in adults with ADHD

- 19% (n=26) had attempted suicide at some point in their lives, 61% (n=83) reported suicidal ideation (thoughts of wishing to die or to be dead) and 20% (n= 27) had never experienced suicidal ideation or attempted suicide.
- 70% (n=76) reported thinking about killing themselves at least once in the past year.
- 51% (n=55) had told someone about their lifetime suicidal thoughts, while 49% (n=54) had never told anyone.
- 14% (n=15) reported a possibility of future suicide attempts.
- Symptoms of ADHD scores were higher for those who had attempted suicide for all three-core symptom scales: inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.
- Those who had attempted suicide also had higher scores for anxiety though not for depression or for emotional dysregulation. There were no differences in scores between those who attempted suicide and those who had not.
- Overall past substance use was higher in adults with ADHD who have attempted suicide at some point in their lives but no differences in alcohol, cannabis, hallucinogens or opiate use.

Deliberate self-harm in adults with ADHD

- 50% of adults (n=68) reported having intentionally (on purpose) hurt themselves without wanting to die at some point in their lives. The mean age of the first instance of self-harm was 13 years with the age of first self-harm ranging from 3 years to 47 years.
- 96% (n=64) of participants who self-harmed expressed a desire to stop.
- The most common form of self-harm that participants engaged in was banging or hitting self (n=49) with the least common being carving skin (n=14).
- Symptoms of ADHD scores were higher for those who self-harmed for all three-core symptoms: inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity.
- Participants who self-harmed also had higher levels of emotional dysregulation and anxiety but not depression.
- Self-harm was also associated with past cocaine and cannabis use though not with alcohol, stimulants, or other substances

LINKS / SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_-LG18hUiI

https://docplayer.net/amp/226654857-Presentation-to-minister-mary-butler-td-professor-jessica-bramham-ucd-school-of-psychology.html

https://www.rte.ie/news/ireland/2022/0418/1292942-adhd-supports/

https://www.irishtimes.com/health/your-wellness/2022/11/21/more-awareness-needed-of-risk-of-suicide-and-self-harm-among-people-with-adhd-and-autism/

https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/health-family/parenting/new-research-highlights-need-for-earlier-diagnosis-of-adhd-1.4856548

https://adhdireland.ie/research-results-about-suicidal-self-harm-behavior-in-adhd-adults/

https://www.pressreader.com/ireland/irish-daily-mirror/20220413/281947431388221

https://healthmanager.ie/2022/06/investigation-of-suicidal-behaviours-in-adults-with-adhd-in-ireland/

https://headtopics.com/ie/more-awareness-needed-of-risk-of-suicide-and-self-harm-among-people-with-adhd-and-autism-31926513

https://www.psychologicalsociety.ie/source/PSI%20Conference%20Brochure%202022.pdf

https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/adhd-ireland-mental-health-5762239-Jul2022/

https://www.medicalindependent.ie/in-the-news/conference/adults-with-adhd-more-likely-to-self-harm/

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