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Suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic: The role of insomnia

A B S T R A C T

There is growing concern over the potential for increased suicide risk in vulnerable populations as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds. To contextualize this risk during the first weeks of the nationwide lockdown efforts, we had 1,013 U.S. adults complete questionnaires assessing worries over COVID-19, insomnia severity, and suicidal ideation. Anxiety about COVID-19 correlated positively with insomnia severity and suicidal ideation. Analysis revealed that the statistical association between pandemic fears and suicidal thinking was fully accounted for by insomnia severity, suggesting that interventions aimed at improving sleep may be useful in reducing suicide risk during the current pandemic.
chronic isolation, stresses, fears, and economic uncertainties of COVID-19 may translate into sleep and mental health problems, potentially culminating in more suicidal outcomes. Although our data are based on self-report, it is likely that the trends observed here could portend elevated rates of completed suicides in the population as the stresses of the pandemic continue.

Importantly, our findings also point to some hope. While pandemic-related fears were correlated with elevated suicidal ideation, this association was completely accounted for by insomnia. Although many of the uncertainties posed by COVID-19 are out of people’s control, sleep problems such as insomnia can be effectively treated. Our findings suggest that improving sleep is likely to have a direct impact on reducing suicidal ideation for many individuals.

In the current climate, we recommend that healthcare providers routinely screen for sleep problems such as insomnia and monitor patients closely for suicidal ideation. While pharmacologic options for short-term sleep problems are available, non-pharmacologic approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy for insomnia (iCBT) are highly effective and often recommended as first line treatments. Moreover, there are a number of iCBT programs that are available online, which may be appropriate for many individuals participating in social distancing. By making simple efforts to maintain good sleep hygiene and regular sleep-wake schedules, it may be possible to significantly mitigate the impact of the current pandemic on mental health issues related to suicide.

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William D.S. Killgore⁎, Sara A. Cloonan, Emily C. Taylor, Fabian Fernandez, Michael A. Grandner, Natalie S. Dailey
University of Arizona College of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, United States

E-mail address: killgore@psychiatry.arizona.edu (W.D.S. Killgore).