Could a Song Prevent Suicide?

A popular song about suicide by rapper Logic is linked with increased calls to the suicide prevention hotline and a dip in suicides.

December 20, 2021 By Jeanette L. Pinnace

In a 1982 club hit, a brokenhearted woman in a disco mused, “Last night a DJ saved my life with a song.” Fast-forward to 2017 and a hit song about suicidal ideation, “1-800-273-8255,” by hip-hop artist Logic, might have done the same for many others, suggest recent study findings published in The British Medical Journal (BMJ) about the possibly life-affirming effects of the song. Researchers linked the tune—its title is the phone number for the U.S. National Suicide Prevention Lifeline—to an increase in calls to the network and a simultaneous small decrease in suicides during a period of intense conversation about the song on social media, reports MedPageToday.com.

In Logic’s song, someone calls the hotline while mulling over suicide and tells a counselor they no longer wish to live. (In the video, the person is a young gay Black man who faces discrimination and bullying because of his sexual orientation.) After talking to the counselor, the adolescent decided not to kill himself and goes on to lead a fulfilling life.

One previous study showed that the risk of suicide increased by 13% after the reporting of a celebrity suicide. Conversely, stories in the media about individuals who overcome suicidal thoughts are connected with a decrease in people taking their own lives.

An international team of investigators collected data about calls to the suicide prevention hotline and information on U.S. suicides from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, before and after the tune received airplay—from January 1, 2010, to December 31, 2018.

During a period of intense Twitter activity following the release of the song, researchers noted that Lifeline calls rose by 6.9% and suicides dropped by 5.5%. Similarly, after the song was performed at the 2017 MTV Music Awards calls to the hotline rose by 8.46%.

In a BMJ editorial about the findings, Alexandra Pitman, PhD, an associate professor of psychiatry at University College London in the United Kingdom, offered her perspective on entertainers using their celebrity to support suicide prevention.

“At the song’s release in 2017, suicide was the second most common cause of death in the U.S. among people aged 10 to 34 years and the fourth among those aged 35 to 54. Rates were higher

in men than women and highest for both men and women in non-Hispanic American Indian or Alaska Native ethnic groups, followed by white groups," Pitman wrote. "Logic, a biracial artist signed to the iconic hip-hop label Def Jam, says that he had become aware of his influence on fans and his power to effect change and had struggled with suicidal thoughts himself. He decided to write a song expressing the reality of suicidal thoughts, but not one merely providing bland reassurances."

The main shortcoming of the study, say researchers, was that "it was not possible to ascertain whether the people calling Lifeline or not dying by suicide had been exposed to Logic's song and related media events or what their motivations might have been for calling or not dying from suicide."

Furthermore, the study lacked demographic information—such as age, gender, and ethnicity—about the song's audience, so it could not be determined whether individuals' profiles matched groups that experienced a decrease in suicide rates.

"Logic has shown the potential of creative arts to communicate constructive coping strategies for people in mental distress," Pitman observed. "Future plans for similar interventions should attempt to measure attitudes to suicide in the target audience to help us understand the mechanisms of action."

To learn more about proposed suicide interventions to assist young people, read "The Kids Are Not All Right. A Maryland Bill Aims to Help."

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