

PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION MEDIA RELEASE

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Suicidal teens trawling the net: not necessarily a recipe for tragedy

A study into how suicidal or self harming young people interact online has been launched by the Social Psychiatry & Population Mental Health Research Unit at the University of Otago, Wellington.

Literature findings are being presented at the Public Health Association conference at Turangawaewae Marae in Ngaruawahia.

Researcher, Susan Knox, supervised by Associate Professor Sunny Collings, is conducting the study as part of her Masters thesis in Health Sciences at the University of Otago and is particularly interested in the internet relationships of vulnerable, young New Zealand men.

"There have been a number of studies by mental health researchers drawing a link between access to the internet and self-harm. And I think the popular belief is that fragile young people surfing the internet can be a recipe for disaster, particularly if they go on to a website about suicide or self-harm.

"But I want to find out whether there is another side to that coin. For instance, a review of overseas studies found 2008 British research which concluded virtual communities can be supportive and understanding.

"It is quite possible for people experiencing some stigma or discrimination to find empathy online. It's an opportunity for them to practise social skills in a more inclusive environment. On the other hand, relationships on the internet tend to be very transient and they exhibit less trust, particularly those developed on gaming sites, than 'real' ones."

"But the internet certainly offers a new possibility for a sense of community that vulnerable young people may not get in 'real life'."

The next step in Ms Knox's study will be recruiting participants who have self-harmed and who are currently being supported in a health service to talk about their online experiences.

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