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**PREVENTION OF SELF-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR AMONG**  
**ADOLESCENTS IN SCHOOL**

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### Abstract

In this paper we analyze risk factors for self-destructive behavior among adolescents and youth. Developing a program for prevention of self-destructive behaviour among adolescents in school considering the internal and external factors determining self-destructive behaviour risk, we conducted an empirical research. 297 pupils average aged 14–17 years old (115 male и 182 female) were assessed on a number of measures such as The Hopelessness Scale for Children (A.E. Kazdin, A. Rodgers, D. Colbus), Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), The Reasons for Living Inventory (M.M. Linehan et al.), Kulikov Questionnaire, Amirkhan Questionnaire for Internal Risks and our specially developed tool, Hopeless Situation Inventory (K. Belogai, Y. Borisenko, E. Evseenkova, I. Morozova) to find situational external risks. All of the participants were school students of the 9th and 10th grades. We consider the prevention of self-destructive behaviour among adolescents in school to include both psychological work and education with person's social environment (teachers, parents) and psychological training for the very person. Meanwhile, psychological training with adolescents should optimize communication with coevals and personal growth. Our study showed the effectiveness of such work for adolescents, indicated by improvement of relations with parents, schoolmates, increase of self-confidence in problem solving and responsibility to the family, increased willingness to work and decrease of hopelessness after our program.

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## 1. Introduction

Postindustrial cultural era of human development is characterised by globalization, dynamism and a high degree of uncertainty. As a rule, social attitude to destructive and self-destructive behaviour changes with increasing value of the human life. However, with development of the civilization, increase in human capabilities, improvement of life quality, increased human freedom, the number of self-destructions in the human society does not go down, but quite opposite, they become a more common phenomenon. Economic, political and social situations change at a pace that is the fastest in history. These changes place principally new demands to upbringing and teaching the new generation and determine relevance of predicting and preventing the risks of self-destructive behavior in an educational institution.

Due to that, prevention of various forms of self-destructive behaviour becomes one of the most important social objectives. Results of the preventative work relates to understanding and prediction of self-destruction risks.

## 2. Problem Statement

Recently, there was a cluster of adolescent suicides in Russia related to mind control through games on social networking sites. Many accidents are related to fashionable risk taking behaviour, when in order to attract attention in a social network, children, and sometimes adults are ready to sacrifice their health and life, performing dangerous tricks or taking pictures in dangerous places. These changes place principally new demands to upbringing and teaching of the new generation. The question of educational safety attracts more and more attention on behalf of teachers and psychologists. This problem has been studied by such researchers as Baeva (2008), Laktionova (2010) and others.

For example, the risk factor groups in educational environment established by Baeva (2008) correlate to its structural components: 1. educational conditions, 2. study loads, 3. Interactions.

The factors of conditions include everything pertaining to objective and spatial component of the environment, everything subject to hygienic regulation – all physical, objective conditions of the education process.

The study loads factors include everything related to methodological component of the environment, information side of the education process and peculiarities of its organisation.

Risk factors of interactions are related to relations between the subjects of the education process: teachers (aggression, authoritarian teaching), pupils (bullying, cyberbullying, harassment, fashion for risk taking activities), parents (abusive treatment of children, disregard for a child's needs, pedagogical incompetence of parents). Correspondingly, these factors are related to the social and psychological component of the environment. Any disturbance of interactions between the subjects of educational process directly influence children's emotional state.

Family situation has a huge importance in formation of self-destructive behaviour of high school students. Behavioural patterns, attitudes, methods of problem solving that were acquired at home are carried over to school, classmates and teachers.

From the above, in order to prevent the risk of self-destructive behaviour, it is necessary to take into consideration the factors of psychological safety of the environment and person. Thus the risk of self-destructive behaviour is composed of an interaction of external (situational) and internal (personal disposition to self-destructive behaviour) factors that define a possibility/probability of self-destructive actions for a given person.

Theoretical analysis allows establishing the components in disposition to self-destructive behaviour: loneliness, depression (identified by almost all authors, including A. G. Ambrumova, L. N. Iurieva, G. V. Starshenbaum, V. A. Tikhonenko, V. S. Efremov, A. Beck, N. Farberow, E. Shneidman and many others), hopelessness (Beck et al., 1985), value of life (Leontiev, 2008), dissatisfaction with life, tiredness, fatiguability, image of self, attitude to one's life situation, emotional instability and anxiety, risk taking behaviour (Bannikov et al., 2015), strategies of problem-solving (Freedman & Newton, 2020).

External or situational factors may be identified by their duration of action: prolonged (family relations, relations with peers and teachers) and short-term (extreme situations appearing in the pupil's life: losses, death, illness, conflicts, emergencies). From the point of view of preventative work, attention should be paid primarily to the prolonged action factors, as they create a foundation for a risk of self-destructive behaviour. They also allow for a prediction of behaviour under the influence of short-term factors and may serve as a necessary resource. That is exactly the leading preventative role of parents and teachers who are in constant close contact with children.

In order to organize prevention of self-destructive behaviour it is necessary to create a supportive and safe environment in the educational institution. Three levels of preventive work may be identified: work with high school students to prevent appearance of the risks; work with adolescents from the identified risk group; work with adolescents already demonstrating self-destructive behaviour.

Creation of the safe environment assumes working with the adults around the teenager: parents and teachers.

Within the framework of working with teenagers, it makes sense to start the preventative work with teenagers from diagnosing the risk of self-destructive behaviour (Borisenko et al., 2018). Further work will be largely defined by the results of diagnosing and monitoring of this risk. It is logical to rank the preventative measures increasingly. That is, there are some measures for all the high school students. For teenagers in the risk group, there are additional measures. Then, there are additional specific measures for teenagers with actualised self-destructive behaviour.

On the one hand, it is necessary to talk to teachers, parents and school administration about the risk of self-destructive behaviour, preventative measures and methods to identify the risk. On the other hand, the topic of self-destructive behaviour shall be discussed very cautiously with the students, and only in case they bring it up themselves, as unwarranted attention to the topic may provoke such behaviour.

### **3. Research Questions**

The main research question of this paper is what is the specifics of prevention of self-destructive behaviour in teenagers in an educational institution.

1. We assume that in order to prevent the risk of self-destructive behaviour in teenagers in an educational institution, it is necessary to work simultaneously with the environment of the teenagers (teachers, parents) and with teenagers themselves.
2. At that, work with teenagers shall be directed at optimising their communication with peers and personal growth.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main purpose of this study was to research possibilities of preventing risk of self-destructive behaviour in teenagers in an educational institution.

#### **5. Research Methods**

This study used the following diagnostic techniques: a short version of Prevailing State Questionnaire (L.V. Kulikov); adolescent-oriented version of Depression Questionnaire (A. Beck), Indicator of Coping Strategies (J. Amirkhan); The Hopelessness Scale for children technique (Kazdin et al., 1986), and The Reasons for Living Scale (Linehan et al., 1983), translated into Russian and adapted by Iu. V. Borisenko, K. N. Belogai and E. V. Evseenkova; a projective technique titled Dead-end Situations developed by K N. Belogai, Iu. V. Borisenko, I. S. Morozova and E. V. Evseenkova, as well as a specifically developed questionnaire.

#### **6. Findings**

Our study covered 297 teenagers from several schools in Kemerovo oblast (cities of Kemerovo, Novokuznetsk, Topki), 14–17 years old (the average age is 15.3), of them 115 were male, 182 were female. First, we identified age-related features in manifestation of various components in personal disposition to self-destructive behaviour at the level of general and general secondary education, as well as links between various substantial characteristics of the components. It has been established that school children at the stage of general and general secondary education are characterized with a large spread in the values of parameters “Search for a problem solution” and “Search for support in social environment”.

Pupils of the 10th grade demonstrate a higher level of hopelessness, which is understood as a result of stress, first due to taking Basic State Examination, second, due to the fact of finishing the general school and making their first adult decision – that of continuing studies in the school or in another educational institution. For majority of the children, the most significant anti-suicide factors are their faith in a possibility to resolve problems and responsibility to their family.

High school students have an average level of aspiration to be accepted by other people and fear of becoming an outcast. At that, equal values in both of these scales allows suggesting an internal conflict, a tension due to the fear of casting-off inhibiting satisfaction of the need in communication and acceptance by other people.

We revealed significant links between substantial characteristics of components that reflect personal disposition to self-destructive behaviour. The Problem Avoidance strategy correlates to

loneliness ( $r=0.4$ ), hopelessness ( $r=0.4$ ), depression ( $r=0.3$ ), passive attitudes ( $r=0.2$ ), fatigue ( $r=0.4$ ) anxiety ( $r=0.4$ ), emotional instability ( $r=0.4$ ), dissatisfaction with life ( $r=0.4$ ) and a negative self-perception ( $r=0.4$ ). The Problem Solving strategy positively correlates with a feeling of enthusiasm ( $r=0.3$ ) and calmness ( $r=0.3$ ), emotional stability ( $r=0.3$ ), satisfaction with life ( $r=0.3$ ) and satisfaction with oneself ( $r=0.3$ ). At that, there is a negative correlation between the indicator of the Problem Solving strategy with loneliness ( $r=-0.2$ ), depression ( $r=-0.2$ ) and hopelessness ( $r=-0.4$ ). Active attitude to the life situation correlates with the indicators of faith in a possibility of problem solving ( $r=0.5$ ), responsibility to one's family ( $r=0.2$ ), moral causes ( $r=0.2$ ), aspirations to use the Problem Solving coping strategy ( $r=0.3$ ). Positive Self-Perception and Active Attitude correlate ( $r=0.2$ ). In addition, the Positive Self-Perception indicator correlated with all the indicators in the Causes to Live technique. The better self-perception, the higher the faith in resolvability of problems and the higher the value of life.

Further, we held activities aimed at preventing the risk of self-destructive behaviour in high school students in their general education institution, which included workshops, round-table meetings and mini-lectures for teachers and parents and implementation of a psychological training program for teenagers, aimed at development of assertiveness, communicative skills and formation of decision making skills and using constructive coping strategies. Experimental group of 32 persons (one 9th grade and one 10th grade), average age of 15 years. Control group of 34 persons (one 9th grade and one 10th grade), average age of 15 years. The experimental group participated in the training. At the initial stage of the research, dispersion values between the groups differed insignificantly, Student's t-criterion for independent samples did not show significant difference in the indicators of risk of self-destructive behaviour.

After the preventative measures, significant differences were found in several parameters, as shown in Tables 1 and 2.

**Table 1.** Statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups of 9th grade after the experience

Parameter	Average experimental group	Average control group	t.	p
Relations with mother	9.81	8.96	2.52	0.02
Relations with relatives	9.63	7.67	4.91	0.00001
Relations with peers outside the school	8.89	7.33	3.11	0.003
Loneliness	3.63	7.21	-4.69	0.00002
Internet time per day	6.56	10.50	-2.77	0.01
Responsibility to the family	5.38	4.79	3.87	0.0003
Moral causes	3.18	2.35	2.45	0.02
Depression level (acc. to Beck)	2.85	5.63	-2.94	0.01
Hopelessness level (HSfC)	2.37	4.54	-2.98	0.001

**Table 2.** Statistically significant differences between the experimental and control groups of 10th grade after the experience

Parameter	Average experimental group	Average control group	t.	p
Relations with relatives	9.17	8.21	2.31	0.03
Relations with classmates	9.04	7.68	2.97	0.004
Relations with peers outside the school	9.26	7.37	3.19	0.003
Loneliness	2.61	7.63	-9.06	0.00
Hopelessness level (HSfC)	2.57	4.32	-2.08	0.04
Tone	57.57	49.89	2.37	0.02
Satisfaction	62.26	54.00	2.26	0.03
Problem aversion	17.05	19.22	-2.95	0.01

Checking with the Student’s t-criterion for independent samples showed that there are significant differences in the experimental group in disposition parameters, risk factors between the initial and the final stage. The significant differences between the initial and final stage of the formative experience in the experimental group of the 8th grades are shown in Table 3, those for the experimental group of 10th grades are shown in Table 4.

**Table 3.** Significant differences between the initial and final stage of the formative experience in the experimental group of the 9th forms

Parameter	Initial stage		Final stage		t	p
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation		
Relations with relatives	9.00	1.11	9.63	0.69	-3.25	0.003
Relations with classmates	7.59	2.17	8.93	1.49	-2.74	0.01
Hopelessness level	4.74	3.02	2.37	1.76	4.17	0.0003
Faith in resolvability of problems	4.72	0.84	5.14	0.54	-2.21	0.04
Responsibility to the family	4.94	0.90	5.38	0.47	-2.42	0.02
Tone	43.48	13.57	51.00	9.98	-2.41	0.02

Dynamics of positive changes is expressed in improvement of relations with relatives and classmates, assurance in resolvability of problems increases, as are responsibility to the family, readiness to work and the feeling of having a stock of energy. Improved relations with the people around, assurance in a possibility to overcome all the problems and having enough force and energy for that, the feeling of responsibility to one’s relatives reduce the hopelessness level. There are significant reductions in the indicators of emotionally-regulative and cognitive-estimative components, as well as in the value of family-related factors. Disposition to self-destructive behaviour significantly changes, while the situational factors related to the situation around the teenager have only limited downward trend, which is not statistically significant.

**Table 4.** Significant differences between the initial and final stage of the formative experience in the experimental group of the 10th forms

Parameter	Initial stage		Final stage		t	p
	Average	Standard deviation	Average	Standard deviation		
Relations with classmates	7.70	2.27	9.04	0.77	-2.75	0.01
Relations with peers outside the school	7.96	2.33	9.26	1.05	-2.87	0.01
Tone	50.13	15.31	57.57	7.32	-2.41	0.02
Satisfaction	54.74	12.85	62.26	8.25	-2.86	0.01
Problem aversion scale	19.57	4.14	17.05	2.82	2.08	0.05

In high school students from the control group who did not get special support, by the end of the year we see an increased loneliness and reduction in significance of social condemnation of actions. Simultaneously, by the end of the year, the students of the 9th grade feel an upsurge of forces and energy. It should be noted that this indicator increases in both groups and is possibly related to exam preparations and increased stress level.

Dynamics of the positive changes in the experimental group manifests in better relations with classmates and peers outside the school, increased readiness to take responsibility for one's choice, feeling having a stock of forces and energy, satisfaction with self-actualization in life. The tendency to use the non-constructive coping strategy of Problem Aversion is decreasing.

## 7. Conclusion

Prevention of risks of self-destructive behaviour in high school students shall be complex and be directed on the one side, to forming a personality capable of withstanding external and internal negative effects that provoke and cause disposition to self-destructive behaviour. On the other hand, it should be aimed at increasing psychological competence of teachers, parents, school administration in the issues of self-destructive behaviour risks in schoolchildren.

Implementing a complex of preventative measures facilitates reduction in risk of self-destructive behaviour in high school students, being reflected in development of the following indicators: students of the 9th grade show improvement of relations with relatives and classmates, assurance in resolvability of problems increases, as are responsibility to the family, increased readiness to work and the feeling of having a stock of energy. Simultaneously, the hopelessness level goes down. Taking into account that several of them show significant differences with the control group, it is possible to suggest that the formative experience actually facilitated development of resilience and prevention of self-destructive behaviour risk in high school students. Improved relations with the people around, assurance in a possibility to overcome all the problems and having enough force and energy for that, the feeling of responsibility to one's relatives reduce the hopelessness level. There are significant reductions in the indicators of emotionally-regulative and cognitive-estimative components, as well as in the value of family-related factors. There are better relations with classmates and peers outside the school, increased readiness to take responsibility for one's choice, feeling having a stock of forces and energy, satisfaction

with self-actualization in life. The tendency to use the non-constructive coping strategy of Problem Aversion is decreasing. There are significant reductions in the indicators of emotionally-regulative and behavioral components, as well as in the value of social factors.

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