



## Suicide and self-poisoning: Psychological aspects – a Sri Lankan perspective

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In 1995, Sri Lanka had the second highest rate of suicides in the world, mostly due to self-poisoning by pesticides. Since then, there have been many significant changes - most importantly, a gradual decline of suicide rates in the country, associated with the restriction of access to toxic pesticides. However parallel to this relative fall of suicide rates, we are now seeing increasing rates hospital admissions for attempted or non-fatal self-poisoning, throughout the country, most commonly due to medicinal overdoses.

At present, pesticide ingestion and hanging remain the most important methods of suicides in the country. For males, the rates of suicides increase with age, in keeping with international data, but for females, rates are highest among young females. This may reflect different factors underpinning suicides among males and females in Sri Lanka. Depression and alcohol use disorders have been shown to play a significant role in suicides, particularly in older persons; but it is possible that for young females, other issues also contribute significantly - such as societal and family conflicts related to changes of traditional gender roles and family hierarchies.

Studies of non-fatal or attempted self-poisoning in Sri Lanka show that, similar to many other parts of South Asia, interpersonal conflict often seems to act as a 'proximal trigger' just prior to the act of self-harm. Difficulty tolerating acute emotional distress, intentions to die, or to escape unbearable distress have been described as motivations associated with the act of non-fatal self-poisoning. These often occur against a background of socio-economic restrictions, domestic violence or alcohol misuse.

We need to further consolidate the gains made with regards to reduction of suicide in this country, with ongoing restriction of access to toxic pesticides, together with detection and management of depression and alcohol use disorders. Future directions include more in-depth exploration of young female suicides, and development of innovative and culturally suited strategies to address the increasing issue of attempted or non-fatal self-poisoning.