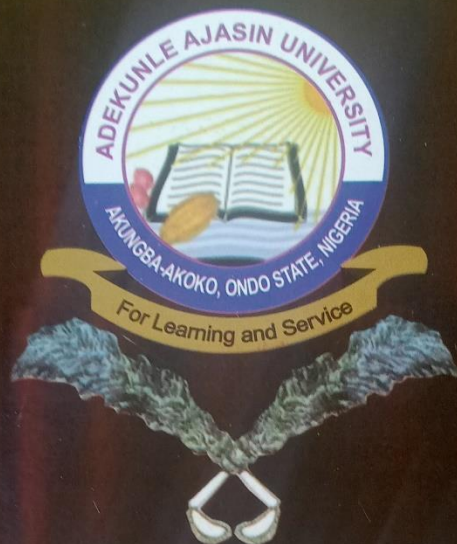




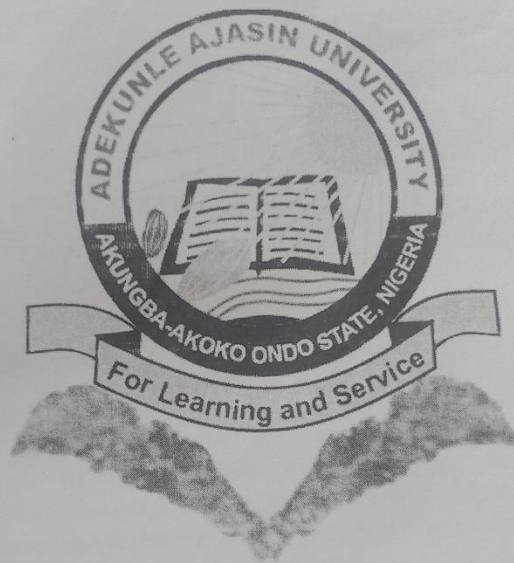
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONTENT	PAGE
Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Academic Achievement of Students in Federal University Dutsinma, Katsina State - Dr. Steve Olusegun BADA, Mark Avese AWUA & Bala Muhammed LARABA	1-12
Students' Perceived Difficulty Levels of Topics in Senior Secondary School Yoruba Curriculum in Akinyele Local Government, Oyo, State, Nigeria - Surajudeen Adewale BADRU (Ph.D.), Segun Bayere Moses, Victoria Oludunni OGUNNIRAN & Cynthia Titilayo ADEKUNLE	13-25
Job Insecurity, Psychological Contract Breach and Job Crafting as Predictors of Organizational Citizenship Behaviour among Health Workers in Edo State - Ekhorgue Helen AJUEYITSI	26-38
Factors Responsible for Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in Nigeria - Michael AJOKPANIOVO, Rasaq Abimbola FADIPE, Irene Abiodun DUROSARO, A. O. AWOYEMI & Falilat Anike OKESINA	39-49
Life Adjustment and Mental Health Education During Covid-19 Pandemic Among Secondary School Students in Kogi State, Nigeria - Oluwatoyin Elizabeth OMOTOSHO	50-59
The Cognitive and Psychosocial Effects of Carryover Courses among Selected University Students in Imo State, Nigeria: Implications for Counselling - Chinwuba Mary ADANNA	60-68
Attitudes and Environmental Factors as Determinants of Academic Achievement in English Language Among Secondary School Students in Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State Nigeria - Olufisayo Akolawole OKE & Olufunmilayo TAYO-OLAJUBUTU (Phd)	69-79
Psychological Trauma and Coping Strategies of Internally Displaced Women and Children in Farm Center IDPs Camp, Maiduguri, Borno State, Nigeria - Aisha BUKAR & Dr. Umar GONI.	80-88
Study Habits as Predictor of students' Mathematics and English Language Achievement in Public Senior Secondary Schools in North Central Nigeria. - Yakubu Sa'adu KIGIRA, Ph.D. & Iheakanwa ONUKAH.	89-98

An Assessment of Parents' Attitude towards the Welfare of their Children in Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria - Dr. Eyitayo Olufunmilayo AKINYEMI.	99-113
Effects of Team Teaching on Students' Performance in Christian Religious Studies in Secondary Schools in Ilorin Metropolis - Oludare David OJO (Ph.D)	114-121
Impact of Entrepreneurship Education on Entrepreneurial Skills Development of Students' at Federal College of Education (Technical) Potiskum, Yobe State: Nigeria Implication for Counselling - Dr. Usman Mohammed DAKASKU and Saleh MUSA	122-131
Integrating Technology in Language Teaching: A Comparative Study of Online Versus Face-To-Face Instructions in English in Kogi State University, Anyigba - Clement Gowon OMACHONU (PhD.), Sunday Sule EMAH (Ph.D), Alhassan Musa ABUBAKAR, Anthony UGBOJA and Adamu Momoh MUAAZU	132-140
Behavioural and Social Impact of Field Training Experiences On University Students In FCT Abuja, Nigeria - Chinwuba Mary ADANNA and Genevieve Chinonye UDEZE	141-148
Understanding Theories of Insurgencies and Terrorism: Fundamental Tools for 21st Century Professional Counsellors in Nigeria and Beyond - Bolaji OLADEJO FSS, MTRCN, MNARC	149-165
Recreational Facilities and Students' Academic Performance in Public Secondary Schools In North Senatorial District Ondo State Nigeria- Dr. Gabriel Babatunde EHINOLA	166-173
Malnutrition and Its Implication on Academic Performance of Primary School Pupils in Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State, Nigeria. - Sunday Jacob OKITI and Evelyn IFEOLUWA OKITI	174-190
Education Continuity in Nigeria during and Beyond Covid-19 Implications for Counselling - Yakubu Sa'adu KIGIRA, Ph. D., Onukah IHEAKANWA & Innocent IKPA, PhD.	191-201
Staff, Facility Issues and Guidance and Counselling Services in Secondary Schools in Akoko South West Local Government Area of Ondo State - Segun OLOWOLABI, Ph.D	202-210

Factors Responsible for Suicidal Ideation among Undergraduates in Nigeria

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Abstract

Suicide ideation is a concept that is trending among adolescents and youths in tertiary institution and the rate at which suicidal ideation occurs among undergraduates in Nigeria is really worrisome to parents, school authorities, governmental and non-governmental organizations. Undergraduates are vulnerable to the risk of suicidal ideation in schools due to factors which include inability to cope with conflicts and challenges, depression, anxiety, sexual harassment, substance abuse, financial problems, hostility, anger among others. The paper therefore highlights the concept of suicidal ideation, types of suicidal ideation, warning signs of suicidal ideation, factors responsible for suicidal ideation, and theories of suicidal ideation. The paper concluded by suggesting that government and other education stakeholders should help by investing in the training and retraining of guidance counsellors in tackling the problem of suicidal ideation. Parents should play their roles in the upbringing of their children and should consult a counsellor when they notice symptoms and problems of suicidal ideation in their children. Seminars and workshops should be organized to sensitize undergraduate students on how to manage suicidal ideation when it starts to emanate and its prevention procedures.

Keywords: Suicidal ideation, undergraduates, schools, counsellors, Nigeria.

Introduction

Suicidal ideation is considered a silent enemy, and a critical health issue which is prevalent in Nigeria. It is an illusion to believe that the problem of suicidal ideation is still that of industrialized countries but it is also a serious psychological, social and cultural, public health and emotional problem in all developing nations. Undergraduates at the universities are vulnerable to the problem of suicidal ideation due to various challenges they are experiencing in schools. According to Wanyoike (2014) the risk of suicidal ideation is high

among undergraduates in Nigeria who are between the age range of 18 and 25 years. Kanel (2020) estimated that about 60% of undergraduates were reported experiencing serious suicidal ideations and 9% attempted suicide. Crosby, Han, Ortega, Parks, and Gfrierer (2011) estimated that 2.9 million students in schools have suicidal thoughts and 477,000 attempt suicide each year. Fadipe (2021) reported that undergraduates nearly about 9.5 million are affected with suicidal ideation in Nigeria. This problem has continued to pose a big problem among undergraduates in various universities in Nigeria.

Several evidences have been shown by Kanel (2020) and Fadipe (2021) that majority of undergraduates between the year 2020 and 2021 with the statistics of 57,980 have suffered from the problem of suicidal ideation than the previous incidents in the last ten years with the statistics of 32,900; corona virus disease contributed to the problem a lot. In fact, 90% of undergraduate students who developed suicidal thoughts were those suffering from psychological disorders, 60% were associated with mood disorders, 25%50% were associated with drug abuse and 10% were associated with borderline personality disorder (Fadipe & Olakojo, 2021). The rates of suicidal ideation have greatly increased among undergraduates, and undergraduates are now at the highest risk estimated to one-third of the population in Nigeria (World Health Organization, 2014).

According to Kanel (2020), the high rate of suicidal ideation has been significantly reported among female students compared to their male counterparts. Mental health problems such as depression, anger, dementia, obesity, agoraphobia and bipolar disorders were considered as risk factors for suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria. Other problems such as social anxiety, adjustment disorder, schizophrenia, academic stress, affective dysregulation, low social support, substance use or dependence, psychiatric illness, and sexual violence are rampant among undergraduate students (Kanel, 2020). According to Nwafor, Akhnmu, and Igbe (2013), majority of the reported cases of suicidal ideation were common among male undergraduates compared to female counterparts. Kanel (2020) reported that 7,900 students were affected with suicidal ideation in Nigeria; of which 4,770 were of male students while 3,130 were of female counterparts. Fadipe (2021) reported that the most common methods used by undergraduates who developed suicidal ideation or thoughts about committing suicide were drug poisoning, pesticide poisoning, jumping from a high place, hanging, firearms, self-immolation, suffocation, and drowning.

Various factors are responsible for the problem of suicidal ideation among undergraduates; these are academic stress, low self-esteem, lack of ambition, bereavement, lack of motivation, underachievement, poor study habits and academic failures, domestic violence, depression, substance abuse, financial crisis, homelessness, rejection and loneliness, insult in a public place, mental illness, aggressive tendencies, physical or chronic illnesses, unemployment, incarceration or ex-convict, humiliation, sexual abuse, family history of suicide, adverse childhood experiences, jilted in love, conflict with parents, incurable disease, sexual violence, anxiety and stress, poor academic and career related achievement.

Table 1 summarized some of the factors responsible for suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria.

Table 1: Selected risk factors responsible for suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria

Selected Risk factors	
Chronic or terminal illness	Domestic violence
Family rejection	Marital breakdown
Low self-esteem	Kidnapping
Academic failure	Hopelessness
Acute stress	Helplessness
Injury from accident	Feeling of not progressing
Perceived humiliation	Academic conflicts
Stigmatization	conflict with parents
Bulling or Maltreatment	Injury from accident
Aggression	Perceived humiliation
Substance abuse	Conflicts
Verbal insult	Bulling or Maltreatment
Sexual or physical abuse	Aggression
Bereavement	Substance abuse
Incarceration or ex-convict	Depression
Disappointment	Panic attacks
Humiliation	Guilt
Intense anxiety	Homelessness

Interpersonal and Escape Theories of Suicidal Ideation

The two important theories considered in this study are Interpersonal psychological and Escape theories. Interpersonal psychological theory was developed by Joiner in 2005 and Baumeister developed escape theory in 1990. Thus, Interpersonal Psychological Theory of suicidal ideation stresses the importance of social bonds and attachment processes. The theory suggests that suicidal ideation is likely to happen to an individual who has experienced thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness in his or her academic endeavours. There are certain factors to be considered if an individual experienced both thwarted belonging and perceived burdensomeness at the same time; history of childhood physical and sexual abuse, high levels of neuroticism, low socioeconomic background, family history of suicidal ideation, and elevated levels of exposure to adverse life events (Beautrais, 2003). Thwarted belonging, perceived burdensomeness are all indicators of suicidal ideation.

The Escape theory provides a theoretical model to explain the development of suicidal ideation. The escape theory suggests that suicidal ideation (thinking about killing oneself) results from an interaction of perfectionism, life stress, negative self-attributions, heightened self-awareness, depression, anxiety, hopelessness and limited perceived reasons

for living. The escape theory of suicidal ideation stresses the roles of failure, disappointment, and setback. According to this theory, suicidal ideation emerges when one is overwhelmed with intense feelings of failure and suffers from negative thoughts. Certainly, suicidal ideation seems to arise among undergraduates when they are strongly motivated to escape intense, unbearable feelings of failure. The literature provided support for this theory and indicated that when students realize their failure to attain high performance or value, suicidal thoughts become more accessible.

Concept of Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about self-destruction, including the idea that life is not worth living, wishing to be dead, and specific plans to end one's own life. It is a term used to describe a range of contemplations, wishes, and preoccupations with death and suicide. It is viewed as a preoccupation with intensive thoughts of ending one's own life (Pienaar, Rothman & Vijver, 2007). According to Nock, Borges and Bromet (2008), it is a means of having thoughts and ideas about the possibility of ending one's life. It is generally a sign of severe emotional distress and is among the most powerful factors of subsequent suicide attempts and completed suicide.

Types of Suicidal Ideation

Fadipe (2012) mentioned that there are two types of suicidal ideation namely; passive and active suicidal ideation.

- (1) **Passive suicidal ideation** means thinking about not wanting to live or imagining being dead. It involves a desire to die, but there is no actual plan to carry it out. An individual typically thinks he/she should no longer live because he or she deserves punishment for reasons stemming the negativity that surrounds his or her life. An individual would prefer to die in his or her dream, from cancer, or a car accident, sustain injuries, but the most important aspect is that he/she has intention to die.
- (2) **Active suicidal ideation** means thinking about different ways to die or forming a plan to die. It also means not only a way person wishes to die, but he or she also talk about the means in which he or she plans to carry out his or her actions. A person may write out a suicide note or begin giving away all the belongings to start the final stage of ending his or her life.

Warning Signs for Suicidal Ideation

Warning signs are described as behaviours associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates (e.g., giving away possessions, writing a will, collecting items that are harmful or potentially dangerous, increased drug or alcohol usage, engaging in risky behaviours, talking about death). James (2013) identified four categories of suicidal ideation clues: verbal, behavioral, situational, and syndromatic clues. Verbal clues are direct spoken or written statements such as "I'm going to kill myself" "I am tired of this life".

Behavioral clues are behaviours associated with suicidal ideation such as purchasing a gun or knife or lethal weapons. Situational clues are a wide range of conditions that change one's life such as death of a loved one, divorce, or terminal illness. Syndromatic clues are symptoms associated with suicidal ideation such as depression, hopelessness, and loneliness (Fowler, 2012).

Fowler (2012) mentioned some thoughts and feelings associated with suicidal ideation:

- a. Extreme self-hatred: "You don't deserve to live."
- b. Personalized hopelessness: "Nothing matters anymore. You should just kill yourself."
- c. Pushing away friends and family: "What's wrong with you? Look at all this trouble You're causing the people who love you."
- d. Isolation: "Just be by yourself. You are better off alone."
- e. Thoughts of not belonging: "You don't fit in anywhere."
- f. Thoughts of being burden to others: "You're just dragging everyone down. You are such a burden; they would be better off without you."

Kanel (2020) further mentioned some behaviours associated with suicidal ideation. They include:

- a. Past attempts
- b. Disrupted patterns
- c. Increased anxiety and agitation
- d. Risk-taking behaviour
- e. An increase in substance use or misuse
- f. Increased mood swing, anger, rage, and/or irritability
- g. Violent or rebellious behaviour, bullying, running away
- h. Feeling hopeless or extremely anxious.
- i. Change in eating and sleeping habits
- j. Frequent complaints about physical symptoms, such as stomach pains, headaches, or tiredness.

Factors Responsible for Suicidal Ideation

The primary aim of a student attending a university is to achieve an academic degree. There are many factors that serve as an impediment in the process of attaining an academic qualification in school but it is quite important that an individual needs to put in his or her

best to achieve the qualification. This pressure to perform has been noted as one of the main problems experienced by undergraduates in schools. When the academic performance of a student is low and unexpected, such student tends to find different manners to deal with the pressure. The challenge often times lead many undergraduate students to the abuse of alcohol and drugs in order to alleviate academic pressure and frustration. Nilsson, Ahlbom, Farahmand, Asberg, and Tomson (2002) believed that alcohol and drug abuse affect academic performance and are factors responsible for suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

Psychological distress, exposure to bullying, sexual violence, parental involvement, alcohol and illicit drug abuse have been found to be the risk factors associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates (Omigbodun, Dogra, Esan, & Adedokun, 2008). American Academy of Pediatrics, (2011) reported that about 90% of undergraduates who experienced suicidal ideation suffered from mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, drug/alcohol abuse, or behaviour issues. Besides, Shneidman (2008) mentioned hopelessness and irritability, loose interest in personal appearance, change in sleeping patterns, severe anxiety, depression and stigmatization are all factors responsible for suicidal ideation.

Perceived physical or sexual abuse, guilt feelings, anger, trauma, shame and psychological pain are highly related to suicidal ideation. According to Brent and Melhem, (2008), sexual abuse consists of 45% of the overall risk factors of suicidal ideation. Unbearable physical pain, devotion to cause of heroism, loyalty to a leader or spouse, loss of loved one, loss of a job, or social isolation can also be significant risk factors (Chehil & Kutcher, 2012). Academic failure is associated with the experience of suicidal ideation. Daniel, Walsh, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussin and Wood (2006) indicated that school dropout and other academic problems contribute to the risk factors of suicidal ideation. Lack of family support or lack of belongingness influence the suicidal ideation among undergraduates (Brent & Melhem, 2008). Moreover, negative mass media and alcohol abuse are contributing factors for suicidal ideation (Ohayon, 2014). Mass media effect may give detailed description of how to commit suicide by a specific means which may act as a reinforcement of this method and that may increase suicidal ideation and modeling of suicide (Sisask, & Värnik, 2012).

Salami (2011) mentioned the numerous risk factors believed to be associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates as depression, ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, prior suicidal behavior, anxiety, hopelessness, substance use, family and relationships issues, aggressive/impulsive behaviors, physical and sexual abuse, stressful life events, impaired coping abilities, exposure to suicide, low self-esteem, homosexual or bisexual orientation, poor communication with family members, family discord, financial problems, personality, aggression, poor academic achievement and performance, and poor peer relationships

Researches have revealed that illness is also considered as part of the factors responsible for suicidal ideation. Illness is identified as a common health factor that affects the physical or mental wellbeing of an individual. Although diseases affect all individuals it is often not known when an individual is sick and how it affects them. Many students hide their medical health from others due to shame as well as fear of stigma. Some illness may be as a result of infection from others or even as a result of poor hygiene as well hereditary diseases. These diseases can be HIV/AIDS, diabetes, epilepsy, hypes, STD, each of these stated diseases have a potential of been fatal if not effectively treated and could lead to suicidal ideation among undergraduates (Nilsson, Ahlbom, Farahmand, Asberg & Tomson, 2002).

Depression is a mood disorder that affects an individual's feelings and adjustment to how he/she feels. It does not mean that individuals do not feel but depressive feelings are often time-based and can change without warning or thought process. This makes it impossible to pinpoint which specific emotion can be identified as an emotion of depression (Wanyoike, 2014). Depression has been identified as a major factor of suicidal ideation. Suicidal ideation among undergraduates is a highly influenced by depression as it hinders proper functioning and causes psychological distress. Other contributory factors include availability of lethal means, alcohol and drug abuse, hopelessness, helplessness, anxiety, attitudes to suicide, help-seeking behaviour, physical illness, and poverty (Williams & Pollock, 2001). Social support significantly reduced likelihood for suicidal ideation and depressive feelings among undergraduates (Chehil, & Kutcher, 2012).

Substance abuse is another factor responsible for suicidal ideation. Substance abuse is seen as self-administration of a psychoactive substance (alcohol or drug). Abuse of substances can make a student to be prone to suicidal ideation. Igbokwe (2011) pointed out that abuse of substances contributes to suicidal ideation in all the three phases of their use- intoxication, withdrawal, and chronic usage. In every nook and cranny of the country, one could observe that students do smoke and ingest and abuse of alcohol and drugs in schools. Some of these students indulged in drug to calm their anxiety and/or hunger, while others engaged in drugs due to peer pressure (Fadipe & Olakojo, 2021). The risk of suicidal ideation is increased 6-fold for those with substance abuse disorder (Ruther & Smith, 2020). Gould, Greenberg, Velting and Shaffer (2003) reported that substances like alcohol, caffeine, cocaine, nicotine and amphetamine, marijuana, cannabis and other drugs have negative consequences on student abusing them, and all these substances could be factors responsible for suicidal ideation.

Frequent feeling of hopelessness is well-known for the predictive factor of suicide and suicide ideation. Suicidal ideation tends to be characterized by psychological traits; hopelessness, cognitive rigidity, poor adaptive functioning, low openness to experience and a determinedly independent personal style (Ruther & Smith, 2020). Such personality characteristics are generally regarded as 'fixed' attributes, which are relatively difficult to modify, implying that such traits may impede intervention efforts aimed at preventing

suicidal ideation (Igbokwe, 2011). Besides, bereavement is considered as another factor responsible for suicidal ideation; the loss of a loved one can be experienced as so unbearable that the survivor is tempted to join the deceased. Loss of a parent at a young age for instance may result in feelings of undeserved guilt, unbearable grief, or fear of mental illness. These unbearable grief and undeserved guilt may lead to suicidal ideation.

Sexual violence is another factor that may be responsible for suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Sexual violence breaks every social convention relating to sexuality. It generally exposes the victims to stigmatization, often discrimination, and it may jeopardize their position in society. It has a lasting negative impact on the victim's perception of herself, of events, and of others. Sexual violence can seriously affect the victim's mental health, with dire consequences in the short or long-term. Also, after experiencing sexual violence, some girls or women act rationally, whereas others display behaviour that is inadequate or inappropriate (i.e., stuporous inhibition, uncontrolled agitation, individual panic flight, incessant and incoherent talking). Among the most common emotional responses displayed by victims of sexual violence are fear, anxiety, anguish, depression, shame, guilt, anger, euphoria and apathy. These factors are predicting suicidal ideation among students (Josse, 2010).

Smith (2006) mentioned some factors associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates in schools, including family disturbances; separation from friends, girl-/boyfriends, classmates; death of a loved one or other significant person; termination of a love relationship; interpersonal conflicts or losses; legal or disciplinary problems; peer-group pressure or self-destructive peer acceptance; bullying and victimization; disappointment with school results and failure in studies; high demands at school during examination periods; unemployment and poor finances; unwanted pregnancy, abortion; infection with HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases; serious physical illness; natural disasters. Williams and Pollock (2001) identified low school achievement; low self-esteem; aggressive tendencies; isolation and lack of social support; exposure to suicidal behaviours through the media and the influence of others who have died by suicide; cultural and religious beliefs glorifying suicide as a noble outlet in the face of personal difficulties; social change; impulsivity and impulsive violent aggressively; self-consciousness and eating disorders as veritable causes of suicidal ideation.

Conclusion

Suicidal ideation is a big challenge in various universities, and there are factors associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Nigeria. Some of the notable factors mentioned are depression, anger, academic stress, low self-esteem, financial problems, hopelessness, homelessness, substance abuse academic stress, substance abuse, behavioural problems, helplessness, hopelessness and others. The paper therefore highlighted the concept of suicidal ideation, types of suicidal ideation, warning signs of suicidal ideation, factors responsible for suicidal ideation, and theories of suicidal ideation.

Suggestions

Sequel to the earlier discussions, this paper provides the following suggestions;

- (1) Government and other education stakeholders should help by investing in the training and retraining programme of guidance counsellors in order for them to easily tackle the problem of suicidal ideation in schools.
- (2) The school authorities should provide mental health clinics where students can easily walk into in the time of emergency.
- (3) Guidance counsellors are needed in all schools to work with undergraduate students faced with challenges such as lack of finance, relationship issues, trauma from painful events, coping abilities, and mental health in schools.
- (4) Seminars and workshops should be organized to sensitize undergraduate students on how to manage suicidal ideation when it starts to emanate and its prevention procedures.
- (5) Parents should play their roles in the upbringing of their children and should consult a counsellor when they notice symptoms and problems of suicidal ideation in their children.
- (6) The school authorities should establish a crisis center and select and train the crisis team members on what to do and how to identify students with the risk of suicidal ideation.

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