



SIEC ALERT

SIEC ALERT is a quick reference guide to some of the newest resources in the field of suicide prevention.

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MUSIC AND SUICIDE

Suicide is a theme that is found in the lyrics of many genres of music, including traditional/folk, pop-rock, heavy metal, country and opera.

- ☆ **Content analysis of country songs reveals several themes that can foster suicide, including marital strife or dissolution, alcohol abuse, financial strain or being exploited at work, and social isolation (Stack & Gundlach, 1992: 212).**
- ☆ **Harewood (1976) describes the plots of 306 operas in which there are 77 completed suicides among principal characters (Feggetter, 1980: 552). In an interesting reversal of real-life statistics, there are more completions among female characters and more attempts among male characters.**
- ☆ **A search of the Mudcat Cafe database of traditional songs using the keyword "suicide" found 27 hits. 20 of these have lyrics about suicide, murder or murder-suicide.**
<http://www.mudcat.org>

Even though suicide is a theme found in most genres of music, few have to be defended against allegations of actually causing suicide. However, in the case of heavy metal there is an ongoing belief, based in anecdotal evidence, that there is a direct link between listening to this music and adolescent suicide.

HEAVY METAL MUSIC AND SUICIDE

Heavy metal is a subgenre of rock that has grown in popularity, especially among younger males. Metal bands usually include a heavy bass guitar and extreme volume. The theme of metal is chaos, on an individual or societal level, and is what most clearly distinguishes metal from mainstream rock. Heavy metal carries on traditional countercultural concerns with social problems, but it departs from earlier rock music in that it does not offer hope, or solutions, for solving such problems. (Stack, Gundlach & Reeves, 1994: 16).

It has been alleged that heavy metal lyrics, with themes of alienation and despair, have acted as precipitants to suicide among vulnerable adolescents. But it should be noted that:

- Lyrics have been taken out of the context of an entire song to support arguments that heavy metal music incites suicide.
- The way in which an adolescent interprets the lyrics may be the opposite of what the artist has intended. A well-known example of this is the Ozzy Osbourne song *Suicide Solution*. This song does not advocate suicide but is a statement against alcohol abuse.
- Many young people who listen to heavy metal also listen to other types of music (Lester & Whipple, 1996: 70). These may also have lyrics concerning suicide, despair or isolation. It would thus be difficult to pinpoint a specific genre as being the direct and sole cause of suicide.

SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS ON ADOLESCENTS, HEAVY METAL MUSIC, AND SUICIDE

- ☆ A simple cause-effect relationship does not exist between exposure to rock music and suicide (Stack, Gundlach & Reeves, 1994: 21-22; Wass, Raup, Cerullo, Martel, Mingione & Sperring, 1988-89: 179; Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993: 534; Wass, Miller & Redditt, 1991: 200; Wass, Miller & Stevenson, 1989: 289).
- ☆ Heavy metal music more often seems to become a problem for adolescents who are already disturbed and struggling with feelings of alienation. These adolescents may also lack positive role models, come into repeated conflict with authorities, abuse alcohol and drugs; and have a family history of violence and/or suicide (Litman & Farberow, 1994: 497-498).
- ☆ Far from placing adolescents at risk of suicide, heavy metal music may have protective functions for some:
 - 54% of a sample of male heavy metal fans who were interviewed said that their music served a purgative function, that is it helped to relieve feelings of anger. The music mirrored the emotional volatility brought on by the usual crises and conflicts of adolescence (Arnett, 1991: 83, 95).
 - Rock lyrics, including those said to advocate destructive acts, may in some cases provide a medium for dealing with issues of death and for managing the anxieties these issues create (Wass et al, 1991: 204).

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See verso for Sources ↔

Suicide Affects All of Us. Let's Talk About it.

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