

STUDENT SHOWCASE

Mental Health in the Time of COVID-19: Structural Violence, the Mindful Body, and Teen Advocacy

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Abstract

This essay describes a film that was produced for a community-engaged research project in a Spring 2020 Medical Anthropology course. The authors collaborated with the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS) to make a video on how to practice mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. The film can be viewed at <https://commons.princeton.edu/ant240-s20/program-for-community-engaged-scholarship-proces-projects/educating-teens-to-prevent-suicide/>.

Keywords: *mental health; suicide; adolescent; COVID-19; pandemic; medical anthropology*

Our Spring 2020 *Medical Anthropology* course¹ probed health and illness within a biopsychosocial model. Taking this class during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which everyone has been (unequally) affected, made the core concept of exploring health from a sociocultural standpoint even more urgent. We were witnessing a pandemic that changed, and would continue to change, the way we live. Beyond the science and statistics surrounding the disease, we saw how it ravaged entire communities and altered our sense of normalcy. The field of medical anthropology, which asks us to view health and illness as situated within an intricate biopsychosocial system, became vital to understanding the complexities of this global pandemic.

Students in *Medical Anthropology* worked in small groups and partnered with community organizations to address local issues ranging from agricultural to health problems. For our final community-based research project, we collaborated with the Society for the Prevention of Teen Suicide (SPTS) in Freehold, NJ, which works on the issue of youth suicide prevention through increased public awareness and training. Our project spoke to the early moments of the pandemic, which created new and long-lasting mental health challenges. Even though the novel coronavirus attacks people's physical

¹ The course, ANTH 240 at Princeton University in Spring 2020, was taught by Prof. João Biehl and Dr. Onur Günay.

bodies, it also greatly affects people's mental health. More people have been struggling with mental wellness because their daily lives have been uprooted and they face an unknown future. As unemployment skyrockets, people face new financial insecurities. Across the United States, people have been struggling with fear about their health and finances, grief over lost loved ones, and intense loneliness during these long periods of isolation and social distancing. Just as with a 17th-century plague described by Michel Foucault, the pandemic has led to "the penetration of regulation into the smallest details of everyday life" (Foucault 1995, 198), causing people to change their definition of "normal."

The importance of organizations such as SPTS became all the more apparent as a result. Indeed, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people aged 10-34 years in the United States, and suicide rates in the age groups 15-19 years and 20-24 years increased significantly in 2017 (Frazee and Morales 2019). Bringing our anthropological lessons to bear on suicide as a psychosocial phenomenon, we were guided by two intersecting approaches. First, the idea of structural violence proposed by Paul Farmer (2003), describes how political-economic forces harm the most vulnerable groups in a society. While there are several risk factors for mental ill-health such as genetic predisposition, race, geographic location, gender, and sexual orientation, socioeconomic status is *the* predominant factor negatively impacting adolescents' mental health (Essex et al. 2006). The enormous wealth disparities in the U.S. actively contribute to the uneven distribution of suicide rates across social class. This manifests in various ways. People of lower socioeconomic status are particularly discouraged from accessing mental health services due to the stigma surrounding mental health; the labor system impedes lower class workers from taking time off to care for their health, and the complicated health care system and insurance policies constitute further barriers to access (Hodgkinson et al. 2017). This is not simply a problem in the U.S., but a pressing issue in many other countries, particularly those with less developed healthcare systems (Silberner 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified these inequities, as those of lower socioeconomic status have been disproportionately burdened. A range of factors, such as the chronic stressors of food and housing insecurity, the greater reliance on public transportation, and the possibility of overcrowding or less hygienic housing conditions, make them more at-risk for COVID-19 infection (Rollston and Galea 2020), and relatedly, at-risk for decreased mental health.

Second, the concept of the "mindful body" (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987) acknowledges the body as an individual, social, and political vessel, highlighting how the effects of loneliness and isolation can take a heavy toll on biological health. The concept of the mindful body is also helpful in framing the effect of the constant barrage of new cases and statistics of death. Moreover, a constant stream of negative news stories can produce a powerful "nocebo effect" which, as defined by Helen Pilcher (2009), induces pessimistic attitudes about one's health and future. In turn, these attitudes amplify the stresses of social isolation and can cause detrimental health effects like insomnia and

restlessness. Given this, SPTS was concerned about the potential of the pandemic, and the social distancing and isolation it necessitated, to worsen adolescent's mental health – a fully justified concern, as there are numerous pandemic-related mental health risks for children, particularly those in marginalized communities (Fegert et al. 2020).

While learning about teen suicide, it is easy to get lost in the statistics – there are countless studies that reduce the complex social phenomenon of suicide into numbers and facts. However, as Farmer writes, “the experience of suffering ... is not effectively conveyed by statistics or graphs” (2003, 31). This is why the more comprehensive and youth-centered approach of societies such as SPTS is so important. For example, SPTS recently asked their Youth Council members to develop Public Service Announcement Videos for their peers providing critical information about asking for help and accessing health services. These videos are particularly powerful because youth are often more effective influencers of their peers than adults. By encouraging the Youth Council to create the videos, SPTS encourages youth to create positive examples for their peers.

This formed the inspiration for our own video project (accessible at <https://commons.princeton.edu/ant240-s20/program-for-community-engaged-scholarship-proces-projects/educating-teens-to-prevent-suicide/>). We filmed a short video that offered fun ideas to maintain physical and mental well-being while following social distancing guidelines. This video was published in the early months of the pandemic. To make the video, we spoke with Susan Tellone, SPTS's clinical director, who runs their weekly video segment. She hoped to feature our video, and given that we wanted to make our content accessible for teenagers, we decided to make a TikTok-style video. It is short and light-hearted, with ideas such as doing yoga, baking bread, and sewing face masks, emphasizing the importance of prioritizing our mental wellness. In addition, we reviewed and offered suggestions to SPTS on how to improve the curriculum and agenda used for the organization's Youth Council, through which local high school students meet monthly to discuss how to raise awareness about suicide among their peers and to increase mental well-being in schools.

Throughout our exploration of teen suicide and mental health with SPTS, we were encouraged to see how individuals' mental well-being is always shaped by structural forces, and indeed, by structural violence. We are worried about how this ongoing pandemic will disproportionately impact at-risk groups and further damage their mental health. However, we are optimistic that the continuation of the Youth Council during these unprecedented times, and the encouragement of discussions among youth, will help to address this urgent issue. Even as people in the U.S. are slowly moving out of the pandemic mode, this issue continues to be relevant. We cannot forget the importance of addressing mental health issues even as we move forward and work on supporting healthier selves and communities.

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