How Has Exposure to Nonsuicidal Self Injury Changed During COVID-19?: An Analysis of the Frequency and Source of Exposure to NSSI Pre and Post Pandemic

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Abstract
Approximately 13.4% of young adults report engaging in NSSI (Swannell et al., 2014), and after the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, people who engage in NSSI began to report doing so due to COVID-19 and associated stressors (Hawton et al., 2021). The purpose of the present study was to investigate how exposure to NSSI, or how people hear about these behaviors, has changed from before and after the beginning of pandemic. We hypothesized that exposure to NSSI would increase from pre- to post-pandemic.

Introduction
Non-suicidal self injury (NSSI) is self-inflicted destruction to one’s own bodily tissue without suicidal intent (APA, 2013). The onset of non-suicidal self injury has been shown to be influenced by numerous factors, including negative life events and previous exposure to self-harm through peers or media (Hasking, 2013). Past literature has illustrated that epidemics or infectious disease-related public emergencies are associated with an increase in suicidal ideation, behavior, and death (Zortea et al., 2021). Previous research has also established a positive correlation between stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic and self-harm, with those who experienced greater amounts of stress, self harming more frequently (Fergert et al., 2020, Robillard et al., 2021). There is little to no research examining the relationship between exposure to NSSI and the COVID-19 pandemic, or how the specific source of exposure may impact engagement in NSSI.

Study Aims
The purpose of the present study was to examine whether there were any changes in the number of times that students were exposed to NSSI after the start of the pandemic. Additionally, we sought to determine if there were changes in the sources of exposure to NSSI before and after the COVID-19 pandemic was underway.

Method
Participants
- Participants in the study were 317 introductory psychology students (74.8% female; 81.4% Caucasian)
- Participants ranged in age from 18-26 (M = 19.01, SD = .90)

Procedure
- Participants completed an online survey for course credit including demographic questions and all measures listed below

Measures
- The Nonsuicidal Self Injury Exposure Scale (NSSI-E) is experimenter-created scale measuring how many times in the past month a person has been exposed to NSSI from a variety of sources.
- While insignificant, exposure through the news x2(1) = .351, television x2(1) = .021, and social media x2(1) = .485 increased after the pandemic was underway.
- There was a significant correlation between exposure to NSSI over the past month and engagement in NSSI behavior, r(277) = .184, p = .002
- Participants prior awareness of NSSI before and after the pandemic did not differ significantly, t(315) = -.612, p = .541
- Groups did not report significant differences in the number of times that they were exposed to NSSI over the past month, t(275) = -.647, p = .518
- No significant differences were found regarding engagement in NSSI pre vs. post pandemic, t(310) = -.657, p = .511

Results
- There was a significant correlation between exposure to NSSI over the past month and engagement in NSSI behavior, r(277) = .184, p = .002
- Participants prior awareness of NSSI before and after the pandemic did not differ significantly, t(315) = -.612, p = .541
- Groups did not report significant differences in the number of times that they were exposed to NSSI over the past month, t(275) = -.647, p = .518
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Discussion
The results showed that exposure to NSSI before the pandemic did not differ from exposure to NSSI after the pandemic was underway. However, we did find that the source of exposure to NSSI varied between pre and post pandemic.
- Exposure to NSSI through a classmate significantly dropped, while exposure through media outlets increased. This was likely due to educational institutions switching to remote learning during the pandemic, thus limiting in-person contact/exposure.
- Limitations included the use of different participant samples pre- vs. post pandemic, a lack of diversity within the sample population in terms of ethnicity and gender, and possible self-report inconsistencies.
- Future research should more closely examine the relationship between varying sources of exposure and the amount of influence they have regarding an individual’s decision to engage in NSSI.
- Moreover, exposure to NSSI during times of global crisis should be monitored to detect possible trends.
- Along with the source exposure, the specific medium in which NSSI is presented should be taken into consideration (is it referred to in written text, picture format, video, etc.) as the effect of this on NSSI frequency/maintenance has not yet been thoroughly explored.
- Lastly, these considerations should be analyzed using samples that are more diverse in age, race, and socioeconomic status.