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Exposure to suicide in the family and suicidal ideation in Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic: The mediating role of unbearable psychache

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Objectives. This study tested the mediation effects of two facets of psychache – bearable and unbearable – in the relationship between exposure to suicide in the family and suicidal ideation in Portugal during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Methods. Two hundred and forty-four adults aged between 19 and 64 participated. Two groups were defined: one exposed to suicide in the family ($n = 42$) and a control group ($n = 192$).

Results. Path analysis using structural equation modelling tested a mediation model. Results demonstrated that unbearable psychache fully mediated the relationship between exposure to suicide and suicidal ideation, even when controlling for the mediation effects of depressive symptoms, the presence of a psychiatric diagnosis, and years of education.

Conclusions. These results suggest that rather than considering just the global experience of psychache in individuals exposed to suicide, researchers and clinicians should look to the presence of unbearable psychache given its contribution to suicidal ideation.

Practitioner points

- Unbearable psychache fully mediated the relationship between exposure to suicide in the family and suicidal ideation
- It is not the global experience of psychache that contributes to suicide ideation in individuals exposed to suicide in the family rather the presence of unbearable psychache

Worldwide, more than 800,000 people die by suicide annually (World Health Organization [WHO], 2019), and in Portugal, 1,061 suicides were recorded in 2017 (National Institute of Statistcis, 2017). Suicidal behaviours are particularly hard to predict (e.g., O'Connor & Nock, 2014; Overholser, Braden, & Dieter, 2012) and are multi-causal in nature (Barzilay & Apter, 2014; Franklin et al., 2017). This suicide epidemiology calls out for empirical research as well as the design of prevention and intervention measures (e.g., Brás, Jesus, & Carmo, 2016).

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