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CONCEPTS AND AWARENESS ABOUT SELF-HARM AND SUICIDAL THOUGHTS AMONG HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CURRENTLY

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on understanding concepts and awareness of suicidal thoughts and self – harm behaviors based on quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative database will be taken from a survey of high school students living and studying in Ho Chi Minh City. The qualitative database is taken from in-depth interviews focusing on teachers, parents, and students. The article presents the main results of the research. First, focus on the research basis including subjects, objects, and research methodology. Second, include views on suicidal thoughts and self-harm from many different perspectives, manifestations and causes of these behaviors, the prevalence of self-harm/suicidal thoughts, and consequences. Third, conclude and propose some recommendations to minimize the problem.

KEYWORDS

Concepts, awareness, suicidal thoughts, self – harm, high school student.



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1. INTRODUCTION

Self – harm is actions that hurt our bodies, physically and mentally, which can be conscious or unconscious actions (Vietnam - France Institute of Psychology, 2022). In more extreme cases, it can lead to suicide through intentional acts of killing oneself. Sadly, both these phenomena of self-harm and suicide are gradually becoming more serious and escalating among today's youth, as this generation has been exposed to the Internet and innovations like never before in history. That's why high school students are facing pressure, stress, and issues of self-harm and suicide that are appearing in this generation.

The act of self-harm is done in many ways, it can start lightly from blaming yourself and gradually lead to more serious things, such as self - hitting, cutting hands, cutting the body skin, taking harmful pills or detergents, running headlong into walls, pulling out hair, self-burning, fasting, or using stimulants or alcohol. Repeating these actions for a long time is not only dangerous to the mind and body, but can also lead to death.

Symptoms of self-harm can stem from frequent feelings of panic, mental breakdown, constant stress, insecurity, fatigue and depression; may also have a sensitive mood, easily get angry, lose temper, and often hide emotions and express them only when alone. This can stem from problems and stress encountered at school, with friends, with family, about money, or being disparaged, or even in yourself when constantly obsessing about what happened; leading to disturbances in sleep, mealtimes, emotions, and acts of self-harm.

In Vietnam, mental health problems in children such as anxiety, depression, loneliness and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder... account for about 12%, equivalent to more than 3 million children in need of mental health services. According to a number of studies and surveys on mental health behavior of Vietnamese students, the rate of female students having suicidal thoughts is higher than that of male students. Besides, 16.31% of high school students often feel lonely.(Unicef, 2015).

In October, 2021, WHO, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education and Training publish the result of *Global student health behavior survey report in Vietnam*, researched on a scale of nearly 8,000 students aged 13-18 years old from 81 schools in 20 provinces and cities. 12.59% of students often, always feel lonely and 16.81% often have difficulty concentrating on homework, while more than 15% of students actually think about suicide.

At the end of 2022, ActionAid International in Vietnam and a number of units published a report on *Mental health care in schools* with a survey of over 1,000 students, teachers and parents. Nearly 50% of children participating in this survey believe that strict parents and pressure to fail in school are the two main factors affecting their mental health.

For the above reasons, the purpose of this article is to provide a clearer perspective on self-harm and suicide among high school students, parents and teachers, to gain a deeper understanding of the concept and causes of suicide. From there, solutions can be proposed to reduce self-harm and suicidal behaviors among students.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

2.1. Subject, object and research scope

Regarding the research subject, the article will study the concepts and awareness of self-harm and suicidal thoughts in current high school students. Regarding the research subjects, the research was a survey of high school students, parents and teachers at Dinh Thien Ly Middle and High School

and The American School in Ho Chi Minh City.

The article is presented based on the results of the research: “Conception and awareness of self-harm and suicidal thoughts in high school students” conducted from February to August 2023 in Ho Chi Minh City. The research focuses on understanding the concepts and awareness of self-harm and suicidal thoughts in high school students, misconceptions about this behavior, and the reasons why these behaviors happen in high school students, thereby drawing conclusions and solutions based on the results obtained.

2.2. Research methodology

The research uses quantitative and qualitative research methods through surveys conducted online using Google forms by high school students living in Ho Chi Minh City, conducting in-depth interviews with total of 9 people including teachers, parents and random students are living here. After collected data were cleaned and processed on Stata data processing software version 14.

3. THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL BASIS

3.1. Self-harm and suicidal thoughts

Self-harm is the act of torturing oneself physically and mentally, in which physical self-harm includes acts of self-harm such as injuring the body with cutlery, not eating, beating yourself up, working too hard. Mental self-harm includes actions such as low self-esteem, dissatisfaction with oneself, prolonged psychological stress, sleep disorders, irritability, not finding a solution, nontalk to people around you, think a lot, let other people’s words affect you (Josephine Elia, 2021).

Suicidal thoughts is one of the results of physical and mental self-harm. Suicidal thoughts are thoughts of an individual wanting to end their life, thereby leading to life-threatening actions (Christine, Moutier, 2021).

3.2. Overview the research problems

Self-harm and suicidal thoughts are problems that have existed for a long time, but now with the development of information technology, high school students in puberty are discovering themselves, are enable to access to negative information much more. As technology develops, they gradually become more distant from the real world, leading to some of them having limited communication with your family, or absorbing too much. Negative information from family and social networks leads students to seek relief in self-harm and suicidal thoughts gradually increase.

There have been many research projects on this issue such as research by the author group Zanus, C, Battistutta, S, Aliverty and many other authors on high school students and their thoughts and behaviors of self-harm: manifestations of emotional disorders. Research on the association of anxiety disorders and self-harm in middle school students: Reconciliation by intolerance of uncertainty and readjustment with self-esteem, by Zhendong, Y, Lu, P, Xie, J and others. These studies focus on finding out why there are manifestations of self-harm in students, and high school students’ perceptions of this.

Domestic topics related to self-harm and suicidal thoughts as researched by author Huynh Van Son (2017). Research on self-destructive behavior - a research direction that needs attention in schools. Research by author Ho Thu Ha, Self-injurious behavior in adolescents: current situation, explanatory models, prevention & intervention strategies in schools at the University of Education –

Vietnam National University, Hanoi. Research mainly focuses on adding content to explain the causes of self-harm, and some studies suggest solutions to the problem.

4. RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1. Characteristics of survey objects

Through conducting a questionnaire survey with 85 high school students in Ho Chi Minh City, the results showed that:

Table 1. Social characteristics of students participating in the survey

High school students participated in the study	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	33	39.3
Female	47	56.0
Not mention	4	4.8
Education level		
Grade 10	39	46.4
Grade 11	31	36.9
Grade 12	14	16.7
Financial conditions		
Near-poor households	1	1.2
Poor households	1	1.2
Moderate	16	19
Well - off	59	70.2
Rich	7	8.3
Family status (living with)		

Parents	68	81
Father	1	1.2
Mother	9	10.7
Grandparents/ siblings	2	2.4
Alone	1	1.2
Parents, Grandmother	1	1.2
Mother, siblings	1	1.2
Parents, siblings, grandparents	1	1.2

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Table 1 shows that the students participating in the study were 56.5% female, 39.3% male. Regarding the age of participating students, 10th grade students account for the majority with 46.4%, the lowest is 12th grade with 16.7%, and 11th grade students account for 36.9%.

Of all 85 students participating in the study, data from the survey showed that most of the participating students had family conditions from well – off households accounting for 70%, students from average households accounted for 19.0% and rich with 8.3%, at least near-poor households account for 1.2%. Most students currently live with their parents, accounting for 81.0%, 10.7% of students live with their mothers, 2.4% live with their grandparents, and there are also some other family situations.

4.2. Concepts and awareness of self-harm and suicide among high school students

Concepts - general awareness of students

There are many studies showing that because children’s perception of self-harm is normal, this phenomenon is becoming more and more common.



Figure 1. Students’ awareness of self-harm/suicidal thoughts

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

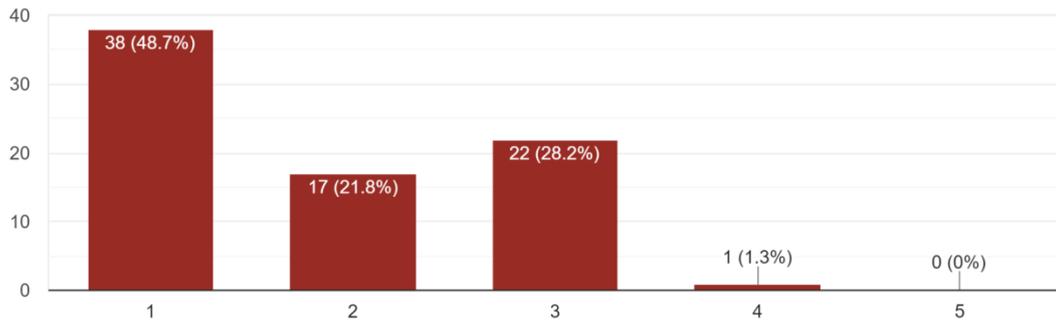


Figure 2. High school students' level of agreement with self-harm/suicide behavior
(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Based on the results obtained from the survey, we can see that most high school students have heard or know about the concept of self-harm/suicidal thoughts, with 92.9% of students answering “Yes” and only 7.1% answered “No”. The students’ attitude towards this is clearly shown, the number of students expressing “Strongly disagree - level 1” accounts for 48.7%, 21.8% of students “Disagree - level 2”, 28.2% however, there are still students whose attitude is “Normal - level 3” and 1.3% of students “Agree - level 4” with self-harm/suicide behavior. Data from Figures 1 and 2 show that high school students are aware of self-harm/suicidal thoughts and most do not agree with this behavior. Data from in-depth interviews showed similar results.

“I know and am also the person who has committed these acts, but I do not agree and think that when a relative commits the same act, I refuse to talk to that person, as if has not yet happened and appears upset and scolds when the person shows additional signs of self-harm.” (Female, 16 years old, grade 11).

The survey shows that high school students understand the signs of self-harm/suicidal thoughts. Data from the following two tables:

Table 2. Students’ understanding of self-harm/suicidal thoughts

Self – harm behavior	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Panic, fear, anxiety, mental breakdown	34	43.6
Haunting about what happened	46	59.0
Feeling sorry for yourself and blaming yourself	61	72.8
Hit yourself, cut your hands, cut your wrists, break bones, throw your head into the wall, hit yourself, slap yourself	73	93.6
Taking harmful pills and detergents	67	85.9
Pulling hair, tearing skin, causing self-burn	68	87.2
Fasting	57	73.1

Using stimulants or alcoholic substances	49	62.8
Not allowing yourself to escape negative relationships	1	1.3

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Table 3. Students' understanding of the manifestations of self-harm

Type of manifestations	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Marks on the body	70	89.7
Emotional disorders	69	88.5
Eating disorders	47	60.3
Body symptoms	50	64.1
Mental and thinking disorders	1	1.3
Identity crisis	1	1.3
No symptoms	1	1.3

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Table 3 shows that students' perceptions of self-harm are acts that cause harm to the body such as "Hit yourself, cut your hands, cut your wrists, break bones, throw your head into the wall, hit yourself, slap yourself" with 93.6%, and the least psychological self-harm behaviors with only 43.6% for "Panic, fear, anxiety, mental breakdown" and 1.3% for "Not allowing yourself to escape from negative relationships". Table 4 shows high school students' understanding of common manifestations of self-harm, such as "Marks on the body" accounts for 89.7%, followed by "Emotional disorders" with 88.5%, and other manifestations. Symptoms such as mental disorder of thinking, identity crisis, and no symptoms are known to very little by students.

4.3. The prevalence of self-harm/suicidal thoughts in the living environment of high school students

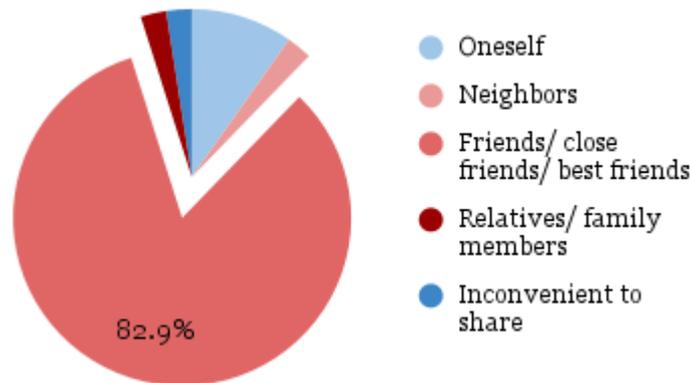


Figure 3. The prevalence of self-harm/suicidal thoughts in the living environment of high school students

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Research results show that 52.6% of the total number of students surveyed know someone who has committed self-harm/suicide, 47.4% of students said they do not know. Figure 3 shows that students know the most common person with self-harm behavior is “Friend/Close friends/ Best friends” accounting for 82.9%, “Oneself” who commit this behavior is 9.8% and other cases such as “Neighbors, near home”, “Relatives, family members”, and “Inconvenient to share”, have a lower percentage than the other two categories. Thus, the research results show that students with self-harm/suicidal behavior take place in many learning environments, are classmates or playmates, and they themselves also have these behaviors. This shows that the influence of peer groups has a strong impact on each other’s thinking and actions. Research shows that people around you, such as acquaintances, relatives, and even in your living environment, also have similar thoughts and behaviors like you.

The results of in-depth interviews were similar, with students participating in the survey reporting that their acquaintances had self-harm behaviors and even attempted/planned to suicide during high school age. When asked why students think self-harm/suicidal behavior occurs at this age, the answer is that at this age students are in a developmental stage but at the same time being under pressure from many sides, leading to students committing self-harm/suicide. “The causes come from many influences, the educational and growing up environment, the treatment from family and friends”(Female, 16 years old, grade 11).

“Puberty is due to the body developing and hormones developing, causing people to be unable to control their emotions”(Male, 16 years old, grade 11).

Situation of high school students with self-harm/suicidal thoughts

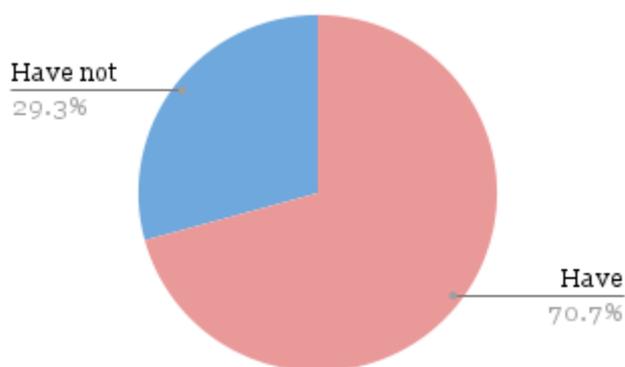


Figure 4. Data on high school students do self-harm/suicide

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Figure 4 shows that 70.7% have ever done or thought about self-harm/suicidal thoughts, 29.3% of students have never done. Thus, the problem of self-harm appears in many living environments including schools, groups of friends, families, neighbors..., and self-harm/suicide among students is becoming more frequent and more diverse.

4.4. Manifestations and causes of self-harm/suicidal thoughts in high school students

Table 4. Manifestations of people do self – harm/ suicide

Manifestations	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Panic, fear, anxiety, mental breakdown	20	48.8
Haunting about what happened	28	68.3
Feeling sorry for yourself and blaming yourself	27	65.9
Hit yourself, cut your hands, cut your wrists, break bones, throw your head into the wall, hit yourself, slap yourself	29	70.7
Taking harmful pills and detergents	11	26.8
Pulling hair, tearing skin, causing self-burn	9	22
Fasting	16	39
Using stimulants or alcoholic substances	15	36.6
Not allowing yourself to escape negative relationships	13	31.7
No symptoms	12	4.8

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

According to what has been recorded, most of the recorded symptoms are physical signs and psychological symptoms can be seen as panic, anxiety, in addition to fasting, taking over dosage and abuse of stimulants. According to information obtained from in-depth interviews, it is confirmed that the commonly seen symptoms are quite common.

The study investigated the causes of self-harm/suicide in students, the results showed:

Table 5. Causes of students showing self-harm/suicide signs/ actions

Signs/actions	Number(n)	Percentage (%)
Blame yourself, attribute all mistakes to yourself	24	82.8%
Show people around you your sadness	5	17.2%
Attract the attention and concern of everyone around	2	6.9%
Relieve the feelings of pain, anxiety, stress, and insecurity you are experiencing	20	69%
Restrain yourself, don't want to show your negative emotions outside	21	72.4%
I'm feeling empty so I self-harm to feel like I'm "alive".	13	44.8%

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

The number of high school students who have ever done self-harm/suicide accounts for 70.7%, showing that self-harm/suicide behavior among high school students is alarming. In particular, according to table 4, students self-assessed themselves when do self-harm/suicide to have symptoms such as panic/anxiety, negative thoughts, followed by self-harm. Of which "self-hitting, self-cutting or taking pills" accounts for 70.7%. And the common cause leading to students exhibiting self-harm/suicidal behavior is blaming themselves, attributing all mistakes to themselves, accounting for 82.8%, and the cause is self-restraint, don't want to show your negative emotions outside accounts for 72.4% to "Relieve the feelings of pain, anxiety, stress, and insecurity they are experiencing" accounts for 69% and in table 5.

Thus, students have many worries that cannot be shared with anyone, which can easily lead to suffering alone, causing personal pressure and easily committing acts of self-harm or suicide.

The results of in-depth interviews show the general awareness of high school students about the reasons why a person commits self-harm/suicide. Most students believe that it is due to lack of family concern. Due to academic pressure, school pressure problems are common such as physical and mental bullying or children are worried for long periods of time. The results of in-depth interviews confirm that the reasons why students commit acts of self-harm/suicide are due to family conflicts, the family's belief that this age is immature, and everything this student does is Doing everything is wrong, leading to conflicts between parents who do not understand their children. Conversely, children do not know how to communicate with their parents, so they commit acts of self-harm. Another reason that also comes from the children is that they "have no feeling of being alive", and have committed acts of self-harm in order to feel the world around them by feeling pain when performing self-harm. This self-harm behavior is also a way for students to prevent suicidal thoughts and remind themselves that they are still alive.

Table 6. Students’ understanding of the consequences of self-harm/suicide

The consequences of self-harm/suicide	Number (n)	Percentage(%)
Experiencing physical health problems, or being life-threatening	66	84.6
Abuse of alcohol, smoking and drugs	48	61.5
Living lowkey, with few friends and difficulty maintaining long-term relationships	60	76.9
Easily isolated and ostracized at school and company	46	59
Increasing crime rate	35	44.9
Reduced work and study performance	56	71.8
Difficulty with finances, difficulty finding a job in the future, difficulty in dating	35	44.9

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Table 6 shows high school students’ understanding of the consequences of self-harm/suicide. 84.6% of them believe that self-harm causes physical health problems or is life-threatening. Other consequences cause people to often live alone, have few friends and have difficulty maintaining long-term relationships, accounting for 76.9% and 71.8%. Other consequences such as reducing work and study performance, or making children more susceptible to alcohol, cigarette and drug abuse (61.5%) or making them vulnerable to isolation, ostracism at school and company accounts for 59%, and other consequences such as increased crime rate, difficulty finding a job in the future, difficulty in dating all account for 44.9%.

4.5. Perspectives of parents, teachers and family responses when someone do self-harm/suicide

4.5.1. Perspectives of parents

According to a 38-year-old female parent who works as an office worker, she participated in the interview, She said the cause of self-abuse was “*adolescents dissatisfied with parents, rebellious, family tension, studying, impulsiveness, and competing with friends*”. Another 40-year-old female parent who works as an office worker said that the reason is “*because she is stupid, does not realize the problem she is facing, cannot evaluate the value*” and “*due to family education*”. In addition, another 38-year-old female parent who works as a sales employee said that “*Because of the feeling of helplessness in the control zone, wanting to step out of control but not being able to, so I turned to self-harm*”.

Two/third of parents’ point of view is that self-harm/suicide is “*following the trend, acting impulsively in adolescence*”. Most parents have heard of the concept of self-harm, but they think this behavior only appears in adults from the age of 20 onwards because at that time there is life pressure and things worth make yourself stress, and high school students have nothing to be upset and stressed about while in school. Parents participating in the study had children of high school age who committed self-harm/suicide. Their first reaction was to feel shocked and angry at this action of their children and they thought this behavior was wrong. This child is “*impulsive/not really an adult*” so they do not take their children to counseling centers or seek help without “*doing anything*”. Some parents say that when they know about actions of self-harm, they “*don’t like, don’t care, and get*

angry because their child thinks like a teenager, think selfishly, leave a big reflection”(Parent, Female, 38 years old). Another opinion *“The family does not like this behavior, it embarrasses the family, shows immaturity, and makes the family judged”* replied that it was due to age, children would overcome it on their own, there was no need to go for treatment

4.5.2. Perspectives of teachers

From the teachers participating in the interview, Two/third of them have learned and heard about the concept of self-harm and suicide.

Teachers have heard this concept before and think that the reasons are *“external influences, social pressure, not knowing how to express oneself, not knowing how to solve one’s problems, and lack of love from family”*.(teacher, female, 39 years old). Other teachers’ opinions are that the reasons for self-harm and suicide in high schools are due to: *“Unhappy childhood, being in a family with mental or physical abuse, psychological pressure from parents, parents abusing each other”*. (teacher, female, 33 years old)

The viewpoint of teachers is that high school students are still likely to experience stress and can lead to self-harm/suicide and one of the main causes is the family, although there may be other factors. Other contributions come from outside factors, but the cause is still family. It may be because of the actions and teaching methods that parents are doing that make their children feel pressured, with no way to escape, but when children want to protest, they think they are doing wrong, leading to self-harm against themselves. The signs of students committing self-harm/suicide will often not be obvious because these students often want to hide this from friends and family, and these students will have a very happy and sociable attitude like other normal people and will only open up when they feel safe with someone. Teachers consider this to be a serious and alarming problem, but it can be cured.

Teachers of different ages share the same opinion that at student age, students cannot have much stress because they have no worries about life, only from the age of 25 onwards there is a lot of work to do and stress. more so students don’t need to worry about their personal lives, so they don’t engage in self-harm”. Thus, teachers have the same thoughts as most parents, that students do not have enough stress to think about death and that self-harm/suicide behavior in high school students does not need to be worried. This explains that the views and thoughts of high school students are not yet understood and shared by parents and school teachers, so the problem of self-harm/suicide behavior occurs and is not detected prevented in time, which can lead to more serious problems.

4.5.3. Family handling of self-harm/suicidal thoughts

In families where children committed self-harm/suicidal thoughts, there are always many difficulties in dealing with this. Many families lose their temper when seeking support, get angry and bored. Another type of response is indifference, not doing anything to intervene because it is considered a teenager’s matter and not serious.

Table 7. Family’s solutions for people with self-harm/suicidal behavior

Solutions	Number(n)	Percentage (%)
Do nothing	20	48.8
Find support and consulting units (therapist, psychologist, school psychologist)	14	34.1
Seek support from friends	12	29.3
Seek support from relatives	12	29.3

(Source: Survey results of the Author, 2023)

Survey results show that the most chosen solution is “Do nothing” accounting for 48.8%. In-depth interviews confirm that the family of the person who self-harmed did not do anything in response to the information that this person committed self-harm /suicidal. According to an 11th grade female student, when her family finds out, they will “not like it and refuse to talk about this issue” because they think these actions are “immature, rebellious and young, so there’s nothing important”. In addition, two other 11th grade male students who participated in the interview also said that their family did not do anything because “the feeling of shock was because no other students had done so.”

For students who have these thoughts and signs, the ways to handle them are as follows:

Table 8. How to handle students with self-harm/suicidal behavior

Solutions	Number(n)	Percentage(%)
Do nothing	14	48.3
Find support and consulting centers	6	20.7
Seek support from friends	10	34.5
Seek support from family	7	24.1
Reassure yourself	2	6.8

(Source: Survey results of the Author,2023)

According to table 8, most students choose to do nothing and seek support from friends rather than telling their families or going to a counseling center.

5. CONCLUSION AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

The research aims to understand the concept of self-harm and suicide through different perspectives of high school students, parents, and teachers through collecting data from online questionnaires and in-depth interviews. According to high school students, it can be seen that most of the causes of self-harm/suicide are from being discriminated against, disparaging of appearance, sexual violence, school violence, and anxiety disorders over a long time, lack of care from family and

self-blame, attributing all mistakes to oneself. According to parents, most believe that the cause is due to the competition, following trends, and rebellious actions of teenagers. According to teachers, most think the cause is pressure and lack of care from family.

There are many different opinions about self-harm/suicide among high school students. Most of the mainstream awareness of this issue is not much, students and parents still do not have a deep understanding of this issue. Especially for parents and the older generation who still think self-harm/suicide only happens in adults and high school students have no reason to feel stressed, depressed and lead to suicide. On the teachers' side, teachers have more in-depth knowledge about this issue and believe that this is an alarming problem but can be cured if their children go see a consultant and parents educate themselves about the level of severity of this behavior, in order to reduce self-harm and suicide in high school students.

From the above reality, each student, school and parent need to have appropriate methods to prevent and avoid self-harm/suicide behavior in high school students. To reduce self-harm/suicidal behavior, a number of measures need to be strengthened:

First, it is necessary to propagate, thoroughly understand and disseminate to students the harmful effects of self-harm/suicide so that students have the right direction to prevent it. Educational institutions need to organize extracurricular sessions to train on skills to identify and prevent the risks of self-harm/suicide. Develop psychological counseling services for students when they encounter difficulties in learning, difficulties in relationships with friends and family...

Second, schools need to organize cultural, artistic, physical and sports activities, and create useful playgrounds regularly to create a healthy operating environment, create excitement for students, and contribute to bringing students a lively and rich life.

Third, schools and parents need to have close coordination in using educational methods for their children and students to avoid the situation where teachers and parents put pressure on their children to compete for achievement. Parents should arrange work reasonably, get rid of negative emotions at work to spend time confiding, chatting, answering questions with their children, determining learning capacity to set appropriate learning goals. For your child, you should not set too high a score goal to make your child feel pressured, even depressed, leading to uncontrolled behavior.

Fourth, it's necessary to create balance between study, rest, regular exercise, and learning how to overcome pressure/difficulties. Enhance connection with family, friends and master yourself and your emotions. Seek help early when your child first shows signs of self-harm, talk regularly with your child and create family sharing sessions. This helps create an environment for students to feel safer, thereby making it easier for students to talk and be open about their problems, to prevent and provide timely help, and to avoid leading to future harm/suicide.

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