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**Use of effective coping strategies is associated with reduced suicidal ideation
among both male and female youth
But males are more successful in reducing stress than females**

In a study recently published in *Prevention Science* (DOI 10.1007/s11121-012-0292-3), researchers at the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania found that youth who naturally use effective coping strategies to deal with interpersonal stressors (such as bullying) experience lower levels of perceived stress, feelings of hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts one year later. The study involved a nationally representative sample of approximately 700 youth ages 14-23 who were interviewed on two occasions, one year apart.

“An important contribution of this study is that it delineates the unique pathways by which different coping strategies influence mental health outcomes,” noted Atika Khurana, lead author of the study and now an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Counseling Psychology & Human Services at the University of Oregon. “It was interesting to find that controlling one’s emotions when experiencing stressors was a particularly effective coping mechanism as it was associated with lower stress, as well as reductions in feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. On the other hand, seeking support from friends and family was only linked to reductions in suicidal thoughts, with no protective effect on perceived stress or feelings of hopelessness. This suggests that even though support seeking might reduce immediate thoughts of suicide, it does not lower stress or reduce feelings of hopelessness. We expected support-seeking to have a broader impact on mental health than simply controlling one’s emotions.”

Although the effectiveness of coping strategies did not vary by gender, female youth reported greater reliance on support-seeking while males were more likely to use emotional regulation. “This might explain the gender gap in mental health observed in national surveys, with females reporting higher rates of perceived stress and depressive symptoms,” Khurana added. “If males are more successful than females in reducing stress related to interpersonal conflicts, it could explain their lower risk of depression and suicidal ideation.”

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth ages 15-24 in the United States. Current programs to prevent suicide in schools focus heavily on referring at-risk adolescents to treatment.

“Our findings suggest that coping skill training programs can be adopted as a more universal approach to prevent the onset of suicidal thoughts and promote youth mental health,” noted Dan Romer, study co-author and director of the National Annenberg Survey of Youth, from which this study sample was drawn. “Such programs could encourage youth to flexibly use the different coping strategies that are found to work and do so more effectively.”