

## **Depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among college students: Findings from a Boston college study**

Shamsah B. Sonawalla, MD; Erin Beaumont, BA, Yasmin Mahal, BA;  
Dan Iosifescu, MD; David Mischoulon, MD, PhD;  
Jonathan Alpert, MD, PHD; Maurizio Fava, MD

Depression Clinical & Research Program, Massachusetts General Hospital  
Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA, USA

**Objective:** To assess the prevalence of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among college students. **Method:** 752 students at a college in the greater Boston area (mean age: 20.2 years  $\pm$  7.6 years; 59.3 % women) were screened for depressive symptoms. After obtaining written, informed consent, the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) was distributed to all students. Students who scored greater than or equal to 16 on the BDI and consented to be interviewed were evaluated using the MDD module of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID-P). Students who met criteria for MDD on the SCID were further assessed using the 10-item Harvard Department of Psychiatry/National Depression Screening Day scale (HANDS) and a questionnaire. For the purpose of the analyses, significant depressive symptoms were defined as a score of  $\geq 10$  on the BDI. The chi-square, Mann Whitney-U test, Spearman Rank Correlation and unpaired t-tests were used for data analyses. **Results:** 19% of the students had significant depressive symptoms, as assessed by a score of  $\geq 10$  on the BDI, and 7.3% of the students scored  $\geq 16$  on the BDI. 14.4% of the students reported suicidal ideation (score of  $\geq 1$  on BDI item #9). Age, gender and year in college did not predict suicidal ideation. Depression severity predicted suicidal ideation ( $P < 0.0001$ ). Women were significantly more likely to have a total BDI score  $\geq 10$  compared to men (22.4 % vs 14.0%; chi-square = 8.3;  $P < 0.01$ ). 30% of the students reported sleep disturbances, as assessed by a score of  $\geq 1$  (item # 16) on the BDI. Students who reported sleep disturbances were significantly more likely to have suicidal ideation, compared to those who did not (20% vs 11.9% respectively; chi-square = 8.5;  $P < 0.01$ ). **Conclusion:** A substantial percentage of students in this sample reported experiencing significant depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation and sleep disturbances. More women than men experienced significant depressive symptoms. This study highlights the importance of screening for depressive symptoms in college populations, and suggests that depressive symptoms may vary with gender.

### **References:**

Schotte CKW, Maes M, Cluydts R, De Doncker D, Cosyns P. Construct validity of the Beck Depression Inventory in a depressive population. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, Volume 46, pp 115-125, 1997.

Sonawalla SB, Kelly KE, Neault NB, Mischoulon D, Farabaugh AH, Pava JA, Yeung A, Fava M. Predictors of suicidal ideation in a college population. 154<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the American Psychiatric Association. New Orleans, Louisiana, 2001.

**Educational Objective:** At the conclusion of this presentation, the participant should be able to: 1) recognize that depression and suicidal ideation are prevalent among college students; 2) understand that it is important to screen for depression and plan effective intervention strategies in this population