

# RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AND SUICIDAL IDEATION IN SRI LANKA

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to examine the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Suicidal Ideation of Sri Lankan population. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling method that consist 12 subjects, 6 per each gender. Qualitative mixed method was adopted as the method of study. Emotional intelligence Scale (EIS) by Schutte et al (1998) was used to measure Emotional Quotient of participants quantitatively and semi structured interviews to collect qualitative data in relating to Suicidal Ideation. EQ tool scoring and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis involved in analyzing the data. Analysis identified three super ordinates themes that were facilitating factors, coping strategies and inhibitory factors with twelve emerged sub themes. Findings of this study indicate that comparatively those with high EQ tend to use more coping strategies than the people with low EQ when they face negative experiences and use inhibitory methods to eliminate suicidal ideation. Further they have never had any suicidal ideation in their lives and they are good at expressing and regulating their emotions than low EQ holders. Thus it is concluded that there is an indication of having a specific relationship between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation in Sri Lankan population.

*Key Words: Emotional Intelligence, Suicidal Ideation*

## INTRODUCTION

Suicide has been a serious social problem all over the world. According to estimations of World Health Organization (2000), there is globally one completed suicide every forty seconds, nearly one million people commit suicide each year and it currently is among the top twenty causes of the death world over. Suicide is a public health problem (Motahar and Rahgozar.2011). Even in Sri Lanka, suicide has been a critical issue for a long time. Psychological theories of suicide emphasize that people become involve in suicidal behaviour, due to their inability to tolerate and modulate the experience of negative life

events (Lynch et al, 2004). This suggests that people who are adept at perceiving, integrating, identifying and understanding negative thoughts, and managing their emotions would be able to reduce the risk of suicidal behaviour (Cha & Nock, 2009). Accordingly, this research is designed with the objective of investigating the co-relation between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation. Limited research has been pursued on the inhibitory role of emotional intelligence on suicidal tendencies. This project will investigate in a Sri Lankan context, to tackle this public health issue, in relation to the modern concept, emotional intelligence.

### **Suicidal ideation**

Suicidal ideation is simply defined as the thought about ending one's life (Julien et al, 2012, p.377). Previous research suggests that determinants of suicidal ideation include negative life events, (Pompili et al, 2011) and hopelessness (Dixon, Rumpford, Heppner & Lips, 1992; Hiramura, Shono, Tanaka, Nagata & Kitamura, 2008). Abramson, Metalsky and Alloy (1989, p.359) define hopelessness as "the feeling that highly desired outcomes will not occur, coupled with an expectation that no response in one's repertoire will change the likelihood of occurrence of those outcomes". Numerous studies have found that hopelessness to be a predictor of suicidal behaviour and, in turn, some research confirms that negative life events predict hopelessness (Julien et al, 2012). Even though negative life events and hopelessness precipitate suicidal ideation in a person, according to some research whether or not people will be negatively affected by negative life events will depend on specific strengths or positive factors (Cha & Nock, 2009; Hirsch, Wolford, LaLonde, Brunk & Parker-Morrise, 2009).

### **Emotions and Emotional intelligence**

Frijda (1988) has explained emotions as central to human functioning. According to Masters and Mcshane (2003), emotions are psychological and physiological events that are experienced in relation to internal thoughts or an object, person or event, which invokes a general state of readiness of action for survival. Furthermore, Salovey and Mayer (1994) have suggested the ability of emotions to form an important link with the personality of an individual that constitutes differences in the ways in which he/she interacts with the world. Also it constitutes differences with the intelligence that shapes accuracy, efficiency and success of processing mechanisms with which he/she interacts with the world. This

suggestion of Salovey and Mayer led to the formation of this new concept, “emotional intelligence”.

Since emotional intelligence emerged in the early 1900s, it has been defined in a number of different ways. Salovey and Mayer (1997, p.11), indicate “emotional intelligence is the set of abilities that account for how people’s emotional perception and understanding vary in their accuracy. More formally, we define emotional intelligence as the ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in self and others”. Daniel Goleman (1995, p.7) sees “emotional intelligence as abilities which include self control, zeal and persistence, and an ability to motivate oneself”. Furthermore, Bar-On (1997, p.14) defines “emotional intelligence as an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures”. These definitions reflect competing models of emotional intelligence. Specifically, Salovey and Mayer refers to an intellectual and effective ability based model of emotional intelligence, while Daniel Goleman refers to emotional competencies model that includes interpersonal and emotional competencies and Bar-On emphasises an emotional-social intelligence model.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A number of early studies have explored emotional intelligence as correlated positively as well as negatively with various psychological factors.

Gohm & Clore (2002) indicate that emotional intelligence positively correlates with wellbeing; Petrides & Furnham (2003) with happiness; Saklofske et al (2003) with optimism; Gohm & Clore (2002) with self-esteem; Gignac (2006) with positive affect; Austin et al (2005), Extremera, & Fernandez-Berrocal, (2005), Gignac (2006), Spence et al (2004), Summerfeldt et al (2006) with life satisfaction; Extremera, & Fernandez-Berrocal (2002) with health related quality of life ; Charbonneau, & Nicol (2002) with pro-social behavior; Gohm & Clore (2002) with marital happiness and forgiveness; Ioannis, & Ioannis (2005) with exercise habits.

Among studies that indicate the negative correlation of emotional intelligence with other concepts, Summerfeldt et al (2006) found negative correlation with social anxiety; Austin et al (2005) and Ciarrochi et al (2002) with depression; Chapman & Hayslip (2005), Saklofske, Summerfeldt et al (2006) with loneliness; Moriarty et al (2001)

with anti-social behaviors; Salovey et al in 2002 with self-reported distress and rumination, physiological stress responses, Ciarrochi et al (2002), and Shirin Rahgozar et al (2011) with suicidal tendency; Austin et al (2005), Ioannis & Ioannis (2005), and Speranza et al (2004) with alcohol and substance abuse; and Pridmore (2009) with posttraumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, and somatoform disorder.

In general, researchers have argued that individuals who are high in emotional intelligence are skillful at coping with the stressors and demands of everyday life (Bar-On, 1997) and at regulating and expressing their emotions (Salovey, 2001) as well as being psychologically and physically healthier than individuals with low EI

Numerous empirical studies have identified various factors that may increase or decrease suicidal tendencies. Among those risk factors of suicidal propensities: depression/anxiety, feeling hopelessness, past suicidal attempts, suicide by a family member or a close friend, substance use, abuse and neglect, problems with anger and self esteem, difficulties in problem solving, family dysfunction, negative attachments with others, and identify problems are specific (Evans, Hawton, & Rodham, 2005; Hyde et al., 2005; Orbach, 1997, 2003). Additionally studies suggest possibilities of giving warning signs by the subjects contemplating suicide before the suicidal ideation is triggered by a traumatic event to make a suicidal attempt (Hyde et al., 2005).

Prior researchers have documented that girls' consistently rate of having suicidal ideation is higher than boys (Reinherz et al., 1995) but in completion of suicide comparatively opposition being boys higher than girls (Bringham, 1994). Results of some research emphasize that suicidal ideation is gradually increased among the young people with their age (Beautrais, 2002) that direct to consider the age group (18-40) of current research. In an empirical study done in US has revealed no significant differences between rural and urban in suicidal ideation (Albers & Evans, 1994). Dubow and colleagues (1989) emphasized in their study that there is a significant association between socio-economic status and suicidal ideation/attempt. Besides of that some studies reveal that suicidal behavior is not similar in developing countries and developed countries; due to differences in economic and cultural – social differences (Philips, 2004).

There are numerous studies that have been done in different countries to investigate the relationship of emotional intelligence with suicidal ideation. Most of them conclude that emotional intelligence has an inhibitory effect of mediating, mitigating and controlling

suicidal ideations in people (Motahar et al, 2011; Cha et al, 2009; Kwok et al, 2010) These findings evidently support aspects of all three competing definitional models of emotional intelligence given in the introduction. Even though it suggests that enhancement of EI would be helpful to control suicidal ideation and reduce the suicide rate, still it will require carrying out research in Sri Lanka to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation in the Sri Lankan context.

## **PROCEDURE AND SAMPLING**

### **Sample**

Convenience sampling was used for this research. Primary contact was carried out at grocery stores and supermarkets to recruit for interviews off site and Interviews were taken place at a time and place preferred by each participant. The sample size was 12, including both genders equally. As suicidal figures in Sri Lanka indicate, suicidal ideation and attempts are so high among young adults, this study focused to sample subjects between 18 and 40. In order to maintain the validity of this study, it was decided to recruit different professionals who are from different areas of Sri Lanka. Participants had to be fluent in English language as the Emotional Intelligence assessment was in English.

### **Procedure**

All the participants were informed that they will be a part of a study and consent forms were signed before the research began, to make participants aware that their participation was voluntary and subjects may terminate at any stage of the research, without providing explanations. Additionally, participants were informed that their data and identity would be confidential and be used only for research purpose. Finally they were given standard instructions to carry out the research. First, according to the test requirements, they were requested to indicate their responses on response sheets, referring to the Emotional intelligence Scale (EIS) by Schutte et al (1998), followed by the interview. The whole process only lasted for thirty minutes.

## **RESULTS**

Emerged substantive themes from each individual transcript appeared to suggest both similarities and differences. Five super ordinate themes were finalized at the end, clustering those substantive themes. Below table summarizes the themes.

<b>01- Super-ordinate theme: Facilitating factors</b>
1.1-Blurring relationships 1.2-Family stress 1.3-Job conflicts 1.4-Loneliness 1.5-Unexpected stressful incidents 1.6-Educational failures
<b>02. Super-ordinate theme: Coping strategies</b>
2.1-Individual strategies 2.2-social and family support 2.3-Professional consultation
<b>03- Super-ordinate theme: Inhibitory factors</b>
3.1-Self definition 3.2-Religion and other beliefs 3.3-Attitudes on suicide

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Discussion**

The analysis of current study exposed several dimensions that evidently support the findings of previously done studies investigating the co-relation between EI and SI.

Identified facilitating factors such as blurring relationships, family stress, job conflicts, loneliness, unexpected stressful incidents and educational failures have emerged as negative life events. Those have been negative life experiences for participants as they were

unable to tolerate and modulate those instances. It has increased up the vulnerability of participants for negative thoughts as well as having suicidal ideation. Firstly, this replicates the solid link between negative life events and suicidal ideation confirming that suicidal thoughts could occur when the individual faces negative stressful circumstances that has mentioned in introduction ((Lynch et al, 2004). Secondly, As Cha & Nock(2009) specified that people who are adept at perceiving, integrating, identifying and understanding negative thoughts gain confidence to decrease the risk of suicidal behaviour this finding suggests people to consider above facilitating factors as significant risk factors that may lead to produce negative thoughts and suicidal ideation.

Analysis noticeably reveals that high EQ holders tend to use more personal coping strategies in dealing with negative events than low EQ holders. Particularly those with high EQ have used more than three personal coping strategies. Matthew and Zeidner (2001) have emphasized that emotional intelligence is the central key at successful coping with stressful encounters. Successful coping lays a strong foundation for those people to deal with negative life stressors more confidently with very minimal negative impact on them. Apart from that, it shows that female participants follow more of emotional focused and avoidant coping strategies such as crying and evolving with something else to avoid the negative event but comparatively male participants attempt to practice problem focused coping strategies such as analyzing. Additionally, there is slight indication in the analysis the females attend to have the social support than males. This finding evident by the previous studies of Stein & Nyamathi (1999) suggested that females are more favoured in getting social support and emotion focused and avoidant coping strategies relatives to males and Gurnakova (2000) revealed that males tend to favour problem focus coping strategies relatives to females.

More importantly, it is noted that inhibitory factors lay the bedrock for participants indirectly to eliminate negative thoughts and suicidal ideation. Particularly the way individuals define their selves indicate their certain personality traits as well as their self-determination towards life experiences. Basically, all those self-definitions of high EQ holders in this study imply their traits are more in to confident and emotionally stable than others, thereby contribute to the literature on personality and emotional intelligence. Further, consequently religious and other beliefs have been spectacular cause for participants to eliminate their negative thoughts and suicidal ideation in this study. That finding is lined with the existing literature which detailed religious beliefs and other practices as potential protective factor from suicidal tendencies. (Dervic et al, 2004; Greening et al, 2002).

Analysis of this study indicates that the suicidal tendency is increased up within age of participants. According to the below table out of 9 have had their suicidal ideation after their 18 that arise as another significant implication of this study. This evidently supports the finding of Westefeld et al (2000) who emphasized that risk of suicide could be increased by age.

### **Age of first suicidal ideation**

subject	Age of first SI	Participants narrative line number
PF A	NA	No...I haven't (59).
PF B	Teenage	When I was a teenager I had (105).
PF C	20	I got a suicide ideation when I was in Maldives at 20's (70).
PF D	10,11	That time I was ten or eleven years old (46-47).
PF E	07	It was eight mm no seven years (88).
PF F	NA	I never have had that feeling yet (45).
PM A	15	When I was a cadet at my 15(88).
PM B	10	It happened at age 10 (28).
PM C	18	I felt only one time to suicide at my 18(38).
PM D	NA	Never have had thought of committing suicide (56).
PM E	23	It was twenty three (64).
PM F	23	Younger days at age of 23 (43).

NA-Not Applicable

Predominantly, it is highlighted that the two out of three participants who have never had a suicidal ideation have highest EQ among. This finding solidly backups the literature of this study which states that EQ has an inhibitory effect of mediating, mitigating and

controlling suicidal ideations in people. This table summarizes the EQ and suicidal ideation and attempts of participants.

**Emotional Quotient and suicidal ideation and attempts**

Subject	Any SI	Any SA	EQ
PF A	No	No	126
PF B	Yes	No	118
PF C	Yes	No	146
PF D	Yes	No	137
PF E	Yes	No	138
PF F	No	No	152
PM A	Yes	No	131
PM B	Yes	Yes	123
PM C	Yes	No	134
PM D	No	No	155
PM E	Yes	No	108
PM F	Yes	No	140

SI=suicidal ideation; SA=suicidal attempt; EQ=Emotional Quotient

According to the research design emotional expressions and body language of each participant were observed throughout the interviews to gather evidence for collected data. It clearly appeared that there were specific differences in their voices when they talk about their negative experiences and movements of body at the same time. Mainly those with high EQ, held their voice stably. Comparatively they were very clear at expressing their thoughts and experiences throughout the interviews that evidently support the finding of Salovey in 2001 that includes in literature review. Body languages and emotional expression of participant in this study is consisted in next table.

### Body language and facial expressions

subject	Cried or not	Nature of voice	Facial expression	Body language
PF A	Cried	Nervous	Emotional	No movements
PF B	No	Nervous	No changes	No movements
PF C	Tears on eyes	Stammered	Emotional	Moved the body throughout
PF D	No	Constant	No specific changes	Touched the face by right hand through
PF E	Tears on eyes	Nervous	Emotional	No movements
PF F	No	Confident	No specific changes	No movements
PM A	No	Confident	No specific changes	Moved the both hands while speak
PM B	No	Nervous	No specific changes	Moved both hands while speak
PM C	Tears on eyes	kept silence	Emotional	No movements
PM D	No	Confident and Stable	No changes	No movements
PM E	No	nervous	Emotional	Knocked the table while speak
PM F	No	Constant	Emotional	Rubbed the eyes while speak

Some of those participants were emotional with tears when they were reminding their negative experiences that were only female participant A, who cried at the interview. Even though it was found in analysis that she has never had suicidal ideation in her life practically she was entirely emotional throughout the interview. Clinical psychologist and the researcher who has long term counseling experiences let her to express her thoughts while crying without any interruptions as it was supportive participant to relief herself.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study focused to investigate the relationship between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation in Sri Lanka. Finding highlights that Suicidal ideation could be triggered by several facilitating factors such as blurring relationships, family stress, job conflicts, loneliness, unexpected stressful incidents and educational failures. Those facilitators are arisen as negative alarming factors for individuals to adept accordingly.

Present study predominantly reveals a specific relationship between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation. Particularly those who are high in EQ have never had suicidal ideation in their lives and they use several coping strategies than others who are low in EQ to gain their confidence in the process of dealing with negative life events. Further, their self-definitions, religion and others beliefs and attitudes on suicide have been supportive them as inhibitors to eliminate suicidal ideation. Most importantly those individuals with high EQ are constantly stable and confident in expressing their negative life experiences than low EQ holders.

## **Applications and limitations of the study**

Still remain some limitations in this study, though it was planned to tackle an important social problem in a psychological way. Due to the time durations required for full validation of the scale in Sri Lanka specifically to translate and adapt the scale, the sample was limited to those who are fluent in English language. When it focused to recruit subjects who were fluent in English most of them were well educated professionals from same socio economic background such as doctors, engineers and managers. Therefore considering those limitations, future research might pursue studies with wide range of age groups, and individuals from different educational levels, different ethnic groups and other religion groups in Sri Lanka.

## **Importance of study and future implementations**

As this study indicates a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and suicidal ideation, this research could be useful for responsible authorities to introduce emotional intelligence enhancement programs in Sri Lanka, to prevent, reduce and control suicidal attempts. Furthermore, as it linked with a newly introduced psychological concept, this research could initiate inspiration for future research investigating relationships of emotional intelligence in Sri Lanka.

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