

The Meaning of Mental Imagery in Acute Suicidal Episodes: A Qualitative Exploration of Lived Experiences

7. Lived experience, survivors and postvention

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Abstract text

Clinical assessment of suicidal ideation focuses on cognitions in the form of verbal thoughts. However, cognitions also take the shape of mental imagery. The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the meaning of mental imagery in acute suicidal episodes (ASEs). Eight persons with severe previous ASEs participated in repeated in-depth interviews and in the semi-structured Suicidal Cognitions Interview. Textual data from both sources underwent content analysis. All participants experienced suicide-related imagery during ASEs. Analysis resulted in two themes. (1) Suicide-approaching imagery: intrusive looming images that contributed to loss of control, flashforwards that clarified the suicidal solution, or desirable but unattainable images. (2) Suicide preventive imagery: death-alienating, life-affirming, or potentially helpful images. The meaning of mental imagery in ASEs is suggested to be understood in relation to the context of the individual ASE. A narrative approach is encouraged, as is an increased clinical focus on mental imagery in general.