

# Character Strength Of Hope And Gratitude As Protective Factor Of Suicide

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## Abstract

Character strengths of hope and gratitude acts as protective factors of against risk factors like depression and suicide ideation. Various studies have shown that individuals high on these protective factors are less prone to risk factors and less likely to have suicide ideation. A sample of 300 adolescents including both male and females was studied for hope, gratitude, depression and suicide ideation. The results depicted significant negative correlation of both the character strengths with depression and suicide ideation. The results of regression analyses inferred that both hope and gratitude were significant predictors of depression and suicide ideation. In nutshell, the adolescents who were high on hope and gratitude scored low on depression and suicide ideation.

**Key words:** Character strengths, Suicide, hope, gratitude.

## Introduction

### Suicide

Suicide involves any behavior that is self-initiated and carried out with the intention or expectation to die and includes self-inflicted, active or passive acts (De Leo et al., 2004). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), suicide is defined as “death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of the behavior.” According to the reports of World Health Organization (2021), over 0.7 million people commit suicide every year worldwide. There are many more cases remain unreported and cases who attempt suicide but are not successful in doing so. According to the data provided by National Crime Records Bureau (2020), the annual rate of suicide in India is over 0.1 million, out of which only five states

viz. Maharastra, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Karnataka account for 50.1% of total suicides. Though, suicide can happen at any stage of a life span, yet it is fourth leading cause of death in age group of 15-29 years. The two age groups i.e. 18-30 years and 30-45 years are most vulnerable as they account for 34.4% and 31.4% suicides respectively. A student took their own life in every 42 minutes, that is, more than 34 students died by suicide every day. India recorded a new high of 12,526 suicides by students. The percentage has sharply risen by 21.19 per cent since 2019. Failure in exams, parental expectations, substance abuse, unemployment, and poverty are common reasons for these suicides (NCRB, 2020). Family problems also rank on top accounting for 33.6% of total suicides, followed by Illness (18%). The annual record of suicides along with suicide rate and population of the respective year is mentioned in table 1.

**Table 1 Annual record of suicides in India**

Sr. no.	Year	No. of Suicides	Mid-Year projected population (in Lakh)	Rate of Suicides
1	2016	1,31,008	12,739.9	10.3
2	2017	1,29,887	13,091.6	9.9
3	2018	1,34,516	13,233.8	10.2
4	2019	1,39,123	13,376.1	10.4
5	2020	1,53,052	13,533.9	11.3

Source- Suicides in India, National Crime Records Bureau (2020).

### Protective factors of suicide

With the reference of suicide, basically there are two type of factors involved viz. protective factors and risk factors. The protective factors include various positive traits of personality like character strengths which help an individual to cope with negative emotions, events, etc. On the other hand, risk factors include all those factors which put an individual at stake of suicide such as depression, hopelessness, etc. Suicide is a clear indication of failure of protective factors in an individual. More the risk factors dominate the protective factors, more are the chances of suicide. Positive psychology, in turn promotes the concept of positive emotions which emerge from positive traits. It aims on various character strengths and virtues. Virtues refer to the essential properties of a character whereas character strength is measurable and specific part of virtue exhibited in affective, behavioral and cognitive parts. Character strengths play significant role as protective factors for an individual. There are twenty-four character strengths in total classified under six virtues among which “transcendence,” is a virtue that includes the character strengths of “appreciation of beauty and excellence,” “gratitude,” “hope,” “humour,” and “spirituality.”

The present study focuses on character strength of hope and character strength of gratitude and their role as protective factors of suicide.

### Character strength of hope as protective factor of Suicide

Snyder (1991) has defined hope as “goal-directed thinking in which the person appraises his or her perceived capability to produce workable routes to goal as well as the potential to initiate and sustain movement along the pathways.” Snyder (1991;1994) proposed two interrelated cognitive dimensions: agency and pathways. Agency is considered the driving force of hope and a moving in the direction of a goal whereas Pathways refers to an individual’s perceived ability to formulate plans and find one or more effective ways to reach his or her goals.

Previous empirical researches has shown that individuals with high hope tend to have better outcomes in achievement areas, physical and mental health (Snyder, 2002), lower levels of depression (Geffken et al., 2006; Thio & Elliott, 2005), lower levels of negative affect (Snyder et al., 1996), decrease suicidality with improving coping beliefs (Range & Penton, 1994). Hope is found negatively correlated with negative psychological results including suicide risk factors such as anxious and depressive symptoms, suicide ideation (Chang et al., 2015; Hirsch et al., 2012; O’Keefe & Wingate, 2013).

Joiner (2005) investigated hope and optimism in relation to suicidal ideation, thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability for American Indians/Alaska Natives. Results showed that higher levels of hope and optimism are

associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness.

### **Character strength of Gratitude as protective factor of Suicide**

Gratitude is another character strength classified under the virtue of Transcendence is about acknowledging the good and feeling thankfulness. Gratitude may be defined as “a sense of thankfulness and joy in response to receiving a gift, whether the gift is a tangible benefit from a specific other or a moment of peaceful bliss evoked by natural beauty” (Emmons, 2004).

The previous research findings have reported the association between gratitude and suicide ideation. Iodice et al. (2021) conducted meta-analysis to discover the association between gratitude and depression on 26,427 participants. The researcher found significant negative correlation between gratitude and depression which eventually supported the research hypothesis that higher gratitude would correlate with lower level of depression.

Sueki and Ishikawa (2021) conducted an experimental study to find out the effect of gratitude on suicide ideation on the sample of 395 individuals. The findings suggested that gratitude as a protective factor for suicide and reduces the suicide ideation.

The study conducted by Kaniuka et al. (2020) on the sample of 913 undergraduate students from southeastern U.S. university, concluded that gratitude was found related to decreased suicidal risk along with beneficial associations with hopelessness, social support, depression and substance abuse among the participants.

A study conducted by Rey et al. (2019) on 1617 adolescent victims of bullying reveals gratitude as one of the resources that protected them from mental trauma and adversity. The findings indicated that gratitude acts as a moderator between depression, victimization, suicidal

thoughts and behavior. The study also indicated that gratitude acts as a negative predictor of suicidal behavior i.e., higher the gratitude, lesser are the chances of suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Krysinka et al. (2015) conducted an exploratory study on college students to assess suicide ideation, lifetime suicide threat and attempt to suicide. According to the study, depression and stress played significant role in predicting suicide accompanied by low social support. On the other hand, gratitude was found to be of significant importance in reducing suicide ideation.

Li et al. (2012) discovered the direct relation between gratitude and suicidal ideation among 1252 Chinese adolescents. This study also examined indirect relations between gratitude and suicidal ideation and suicide attempts by two self-system beliefs i.e., coping efficacy and self-esteem. Result of the study indicated that suicide ideation and suicide attempts were lower in those adolescents who scored high on gratitude.

In the present era of globalization, suicide has become an important social, psychological and public concern worldwide among adolescents. Adolescence is the phase of full of hopes. It is important to study the well-being aspects of this unique and sensitive age group separately because their lives have a tremendous impact on the foundation of the nation. A very few consistent research has been done on the field of the psychological measures such as character strength of hope and gratitude on the target population. Considering the increasing magnitude of suicide among adolescents, to explore character strength of gratitude and hope as the protective factor against suicide is the purpose of the present research study.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To examine the relationship among Hope, Gratitude, Depression and Suicide Ideation.

2. To see the effect of Hope and Gratitude on Depression and Suicide Ideation.

### Hypotheses

1. There would be significant negative association of Hope and Gratitude with Depression and Suicide Ideation.
2. It is hypothesized that Hope and Gratitude would be predictors of Depression and Suicide Ideation.

### Method

#### Participants

The sample selected for the study consists of adolescents with age range of 17-24 years. The sample size for the study was 300 students (N=300) belonging to various schools, colleges and universities of Haryana and Delhi NCR region comprising both male and female.

#### Measures

1. **Value in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS: 120 items Version):** it is a test of 120 items scale derived by Dr. Robert McGrath from the original 240 items scale, used to measure character strength of subjects with age 18 years and above (Peterson & Seligman 2004). As there are 24-character strengths, the test consists of 5 items for each strength. The minimum possible score of each strength is '5' and maximum possible score for each strength is '25'. It is a 5-point Likert scale in which the numbers (1), (2), (3), (4), (5) refers to Very Much Like Me, Like Me, Neutral, Unlike Me, Very Much Unlike Me, respectively. The test is reverse scored which means, if the participant has chosen (5)/ Very Much Unlike Me then it will be scored as '1' point and similarly if the participant has chosen (1)/ Very Much Like Me then it will be scored as '5' points for the final score.

While scoring for the test, the respective scores of each strength are added and final score is obtained.

2. **The Beck Suicide Ideation Scale-BSSI:** It is a self-report inventory to measure the intensity of patient's attitude and plans towards suicide during past weeks, developed by Aaron T. Beck (1991). The test is divided into two parts viz. Part-1 with 5 items and Part-2 with 16 items. The minimum score of the test is '0' and maximum score is '42'. The participants are supposed to attempt Part-1 first, if the participants have chosen '0' in both Item no. 4 and Item no. 5, they can directly skip to Item no. 20. and only if they have chosen any other option then '0' in Item no. 4 and item no. 5, have to proceed to next statement which is in Part-2.
3. **Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II):** prepared by Aaron T. Beck, this inventory consists of 21 items which measure depression and is applicable for subjects of age of 13 years and above (1996). There are four options for each item and the participant has to choose any one of them which is most appropriate according to him/her. The minimum possible score for the test is '0' and maximum possible score is '63'.

#### Procedure

A total of 300 participants were surveyed for obtaining the data which included both males and females. All the participants were of age group 17 to 24 years. The sample was collected from various schools, colleges and universities of Haryana and Delhi NCR region. The survey was conducted as part of thesis work in the form of self-reported questionnaires which were distributed to the participants and collected back after marking their desired responses. The questionnaire included three scales, one for Character strengths of Gratitude and Hope, one

for assessment of Depression and one for the assessment of Suicide Ideation.

### Results and Discussion

The data obtained from the study was analyzed with the help of SPSS 20.0. The descriptive

statistics (mean and standard deviation) and Pearson's product moment coefficient of correlation was applied to explore the relationship among the variables of the present study. The results obtained from analysis are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2 Correlation coefficients of Hope, Gratitude, Suicide Ideation and Depression**

	Hope	Gratitude	BSSI	BDI	Mean	SD
Hope	1	.583**	-.637**	-.389**	14.16	4.858
Gratitude		1	-.488**	-.484**	13.25	5.935
BSSI			1	.381**	5.33	2.264
BDI				1	12.23	10.095

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

**Note:** BSSI- Beck Scale of Suicide Ideation, BDI- Beck Depression Inventory, SD-Standard Deviation

The findings obtained from the present research as depicted in Table 2 show the relationship between hope, gratitude, depression and suicide ideation. The findings of the present study depict the significant negative correlation ( $r=-.637$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between Hope and Suicide Ideation. Thus, on the basis of the findings, the first hypothesis i.e., 'there shall be a significant relationship between Hope and Suicide among Adolescents' is accepted. The findings also reveal significant negative correlation ( $r=-.488$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between Gratitude and Suicide ideation which infers that the second hypothesis of the

study i.e., 'there shall be a significant relationship between Gratitude and Suicide among Adolescents' stands accepted. The findings reveal the significant negative correlation ( $r=-.389$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between Hope and Depression. The results also depict the significant negative correlation ( $r=-.484$ ,  $p<.01$ ) between Gratitude and Depression. The present findings endow us the trace that people with higher level of character strength of hope and character strength of gratitude are less prone to depression and get engage in suicidal behavior.

**The regression analysis in Table 3 shows the character strengths of hope and gratitude as predictors of depression.**

Predictors	B	S.E. B	$\beta$	t value	Sig. (p)
Gratitude	-.424	.208	-.143	-2.042	.042
Hope	-.983	.173	-.399	-5.689	.000
R <sup>2</sup>	.260				
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.255				
F	52.110				<.001

The table 2 shows that the dependent variable depression was regressed on predicting variables i.e. gratitude and hope to test the hypothesis. Gratitude and hope significantly predicted depression,  $F(2,297)=52.110$ ,  $p<.001$  which indicated that gratitude and hope can

play significant role in predicting depression,  $\beta=.143$ ,  $t=-2.042$ ,  $p<.042$ . for gratitude and  $\beta=-.399$ ,  $t=-5.689$ ,  $p<.005$  for hope. Moreover the  $R^2=.260$  depicts that the model explain 26% of variance in depression.

**The regression analysis in Table 4 shows the character strengths of hope and gratitude as predictors of suicide ideation.**

Predictors	B	S.E. B	$\beta$	t value	Sig. (p)
Gratitude	.040	.160	.019	.251	.802
Hope	-.636	.133	-.365	-.4791	.000
$R^2$	.124				
Adjusted $R^2$	.118				
F	21.034				<.001

The table 3 shows that the dependent variable suicide ideation was regressed on predicting variables i.e. gratitude and hope to test the hypothesis. Gratitude and hope significantly predicted suicide ideation,  $F(2,297)=21.034$ ,  $p<.001$  which indicated that gratitude and hope can play significant role in predicting suicide ideation,  $\beta=.019$ ,  $t=-.251$ ,  $p<.802$ . for gratitude and  $\beta=-.365$ ,  $t=-.479$ ,  $p<.001$  for hope. Moreover the  $R^2=.118$  depicts that the model explain 11.8% of variance in depression.

The present research findings are in congruence with previous research of Chang et. al. (2016) which indicated significant lower level of suicide ideation among the individuals with higher level of hope. The results of this study are also supported by research study conducted by Edward Chang (2017) on the sample of Hungarian students wherein they obtained the result that hope acts as a buffer between hopelessness and suicide ideation. The negative correlation between character strength of gratitude and suicide ideation are also supported by various studies done in past. Kleiman et. al. (2013) examined a study on the sample of 369 undergraduate students wherein they found that grateful individuals are not suicidal tendency prone and findings also suggest that gratitude acts as a protective factor

against suicide. Another study by Ma et. al. (2013) also indicated similar results i.e., gratitude is associated with greater level of protective factors and it lowers the risk among African American adolescents.

Considering the above outcomes, the present research study provides the intelligence that character strength of hope and gratitude probably serves as the protective factor for suicide ideation and depression.

## Conclusion

Suicide has become a worldwide concern particularly among adolescents. In India, adolescents show highest rate of suicide in comparison to other age groups. The present study signifies the significant negative relationship between hope and suicide as well as between gratitude and suicide. Inferring from the findings of present study, it can be concluded that despite the hurdles facing today's adolescents, strategies drawn from positive psychology can help to protect them against negative emotions. When they learn to apply the science of hope, and gratitude, it leads to positive outcomes in their lives. Further, study suggests that it is important to nurture the character strengths from early age so that the

individuals do not fall prey to risk factors and exhibit any behavior related to self-harm.

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