

Perfectionism is a bigger than perceived risk factor in suicide

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Perfectionism is a bigger risk factor in suicide than we may think, says York University Psychology Professor Gordon Flett, calling for closer attention to its potential destructiveness, adding that clinical guidelines should include perfectionism as a separate factor for suicide risk assessment and intervention.

"There is an urgent need for looking at perfectionism with a person-centred approach as an individual and societal risk factor, when formulating [clinical guidelines](#) for [suicide](#) risk assessment and intervention, as well as public health approaches to [suicide prevention](#)," says Flett.

More than one million people worldwide, including over 40,000 North Americans commit suicide on an annual basis, according to the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention's 2012 estimation.

In a research article, Flett and his co-authors Professor Paul Hewitt of the University of British Columbia and Professor Marnin Heisel of Western University note that physicians, lawyers and architects, whose occupations emphasize on precision, and also those in leadership roles are at higher risk for perfectionism-related suicide, citing the recent cases of prominent perfectionists who died by suicide.

Their article, *The Destructiveness of Perfectionism Revisited: Implications for the Assessment of Suicide Risk and the Prevention of Suicide*, published this week in the American Psychological Association journal,

Review of General Psychology, highlights several concerns, including how suicide thoughts can be linked to external pressures to be perfect.

The authors document how being exposed to relentless demands to be perfect, a concept they refer to as socially prescribed perfectionism, is linked consistently with hopelessness and suicide. Other key themes discussed are: how perfectionistic self-presentation and self-concealment can lead to suicides that occur without warning; and how perfectionists often come up with thorough and precise suicide plans.

"We summarize data showing consistent links between perfectionism and hopelessness and discuss the need for an individualized approach that recognizes the heightened risk for perfectionists," Flett says adding, "They also tend to experience hopelessness, psychological pain, life stress, overgeneralization, and a form of emotional [perfectionism](#) that restricts the willingness to disclose suicidal urges and intentions."

The article also discusses why it is essential to proactively design preventive programs tailored to key personality features with specific components to enhance resilience and reduce levels of risk among perfectionists who hide behind a mask of apparent invulnerability.

Provided by York University

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