

Suicide risk linked to push for perfection

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Credit: Johnny Magnusson

People who believe they must be perfect – and who ultimately can't deal with the thought of being flawed – are at much greater risk of suicidal

thoughts and suicide, according to a recent Western co-authored study.

"We tend to think of [perfectionism](#) as potentially a good thing. We're told, 'Aim high, reach for the stars,'" said Psychology PhD candidate Martin Smith, lead investigator on the study. "But for some people, even excellence isn't good enough, and that's where they run into issues. Insisting on flawlessness is simply not mentally healthy, adaptive or advisable."

The Perniciousness of Perfectionism was recently published in *Journal of Personality*.

Smith and his team drew together 45 studies and 54 samples representing almost 12,000 participants in the most comprehensive analysis to date of the perfectionism-suicide link. The study notes that 10-20 million people attempt suicide each year and nearly one million people die by suicide. And while suicide rarely has one single cause, perfectionism must now be added to the list of potential contributing concerns, he said.

"We can't at this point say perfectionism is a cause of suicide. But we can say the two correlate closely," he said. "The drive to be perfect – whether it's because of internal or external pressure to succeed without ever failing – can be an unbearable and untenable strain."

People intent on perfection often fly below professionals' radar because seeking help is an admission they are imperfect, he said.

The researchers said the study can help clinicians be more aware of an array of suicidal markers and develop preventive measures.

"Our findings join a wider literature suggesting that, when [people](#) experience their social world as pressure-filled, judgmental, and hyper-

critical, they think about and/or engage in various potential means of escape (e.g., alcohol misuse and binge eating), including [suicide](#)," the study stated.

More information: Martin M. Smith et al. The Perniciousness of Perfectionism: A Meta-Analytic Review of the Perfectionism-Suicide Relationship, *Journal of Personality* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jopy.12333](https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12333)

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