



# Research Week 2020

## Critical moments: how veterans with a recent suicide attempt describe their thoughts and feelings before attempting suicide

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### Keywords

self-concept, self-compassion, suicide, suicidal ideation

### Abstract

#### Objective

Few studies have asked veterans about their lived experiences with suicidal thoughts and little is known about the thoughts and feelings that arise leading up to a suicide attempt. This study aimed to understand how veterans describe their thoughts and feelings just prior to attempting suicide and explored what may support recovery.

#### Methods

This was a national qualitative study of 50 (25 women, 25 men) United States (U.S.) Veterans who made a recent suicide attempt (prior 6 months). Participants were treatment-seeking patients at Veterans Affairs medical centers, recruited through their clinician. A modified grounded theory approach was used to conduct the semi-structured interviews, covering topics of military history, suicidal thoughts and attempts, and healthcare and recovery experiences.

#### Results

When asked about thoughts leading up to their most recent suicide attempt, veterans reported experiencing negative thoughts about how they viewed themselves, how others perceived them, and not living up to their ideal selves. We conceptualized veterans' negative beliefs and perceptions of self as negative self-concept. Veterans experiencing negative self-concept identified feelings of perceived failure, lack of achievement, and low self-esteem. When asked what would help or has helped in their recovery from suicide attempts, veterans expressed a desire to learn more about themselves and to feel like their thoughts, behaviors, and feelings were acceptable. We conceptualized this as a desire for increased self-compassion, which is the practice of kindness and understanding towards oneself in times of stress and acceptance of failure and imperfections as a shared human experience.

## Conclusions

These findings suggest an increased need to address negative self-concept among patients at risk for suicide, which may include examining the effectiveness of interventions focusing on teaching and practicing self-compassion skills in reducing suicidal behaviors.

