



Research Week 2021

Gender Differences in Suicide Risk: 'I suck' vs 'The world sucks'

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Abstract

Research Aims:

Suicide rates for men and women are both increasing, but the rate at which suicide among women has increased is staggering compared to men, suggesting the need to investigate potential gender differences in suicide risk. Previous studies have relied on top-down quantitative methods, limiting our understanding to specific variables and subpopulations. In contrast, qualitative research lends a unique understanding of suicide risk from the lived experiences of veterans. The goal of this study is to identify gender differences in suicide risk to support gender-tailored suicide prevention.

Methods:

This study is part of a larger study on gender differences in suicide risk and recovery. Using a modified grounded theory approach, we interviewed 50 (25 men, 25 women) clinically and demographically diverse military veterans with a recent suicide attempt (prior 6 months). Participants were recruited from Veterans Health Administration (VHA) healthcare facilities across the United States, representing 29 of 50 states. Analytic memos provided a basis for initial comparative analysis and codebook development.

Results:

When characterizing the events leading up to their suicide attempt, veterans described differing thought processes centering on their evaluations of self and their existence in the world, reflecting differences in their self-concept. Specifically, women described feeling worthless and shameful, often a reflection of how they believed others viewed them, 'I suck; I don't feel worthy of life'. Men experienced being overwhelmed by multiple stressors and a lack of purpose, feeling frustrated that they were unable to achieve the level of success they believe they should have, 'The world sucks; it's not worth it'.

Conclusions:

This study suggests that women may benefit from interventions aimed at increasing self-worth by way of building positive social relationships whereas men may benefit from interventions targeted at increasing their sense of purpose in life to help them achieve their ideal selves.