



## FROM THE DIRECTOR

As the country continues navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, I am thankful to the many VA investigators engaged in this research. I encourage you to review [VA Research activities](#) as well as visit [VA's COVID-19 research volunteer list](#) to learn how you can be part of these efforts.

November at the CoE included the recent release of the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, encompassing the most recent analysis of Veteran suicide data from 2005 to 2018. More information regarding this comprehensive report can be found below.

Are you or someone you know interested in becoming a leader in suicide prevention research among Veterans? We are currently accepting applications for our Advanced Postdoctoral Fellowship Program. Our two-year program is designed to provide psychologists and physicians with the experience necessary to become leaders and innovators in suicide prevention research among Veterans. Learn more about our program in this issue.

- Wilfred R. Pigeon, Ph.D.



## DATA & ANALYTICS DIVISION

### 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report Released

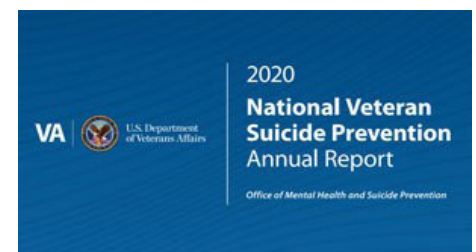
As the most comprehensive analysis of Veteran suicide data, the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Annual Report documents the continuing problem of suicide among U.S. adults and Veterans and highlights the need for ongoing efforts to mitigate suicide risks. The report also identifies several **Anchors of Hope** as deliberate reminders there is hope as we continue the mission to end Veteran suicide, such as:

**the Veteran suicide rate did not increase significantly between 2007 and 2018; and**

**there is a groundswell of support for coordinated efforts at the local, regional and national levels to implement a public health approach to end suicide.**

The Data & Analytics team at the Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention played a key role in the development of this year's report. [View and download the updated report](#) as well as [state-level suicide findings](#). For additional information, visit the [Suicide Prevention Veteran Suicide Data and Reporting website](#).

In addition to supporting the annual report, the CoE's Data & Analytics team manages the process for accessing VA's all-cause mortality death data, including suicide, through the VA Mortality Data Repository (MDR). Through October 2020, the MDR has supported over 170 VA research and operations projects, including 46 specifically focused on examining suicide mortality in the Veteran population. With the release of the 2020 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, requests for 2018 National Death Index data through the MDR are now being accepted for review and approval. [View the MDR flyer](#) or [contact the team](#) for more information.





## RESEARCH DIVISION

### Can psychological inflexibility exacerbate the effects of COVID-19 stress on suicide risk?

This month's newsletter emphasizes the importance of "psychological flexibility," concluding a year in which most of us have flexed our lives in several ways. As you read this month's issue, examine how increasing psychological flexibility can help you deal with stress, improve your wellbeing and frame 2021 goals around your values.

While nearly every nation in the world continues to implement "social distancing" strategies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, past research examining psychological functioning during quarantine situations suggests such measures can impact mental health, including increased suicide risk. Public health researchers have raised the concern that both the pandemic and social distancing strategies will increase interpersonal stressors associated with suicide risk. A recent study, led by [Dev Crasta, Ph.D.](#), examines how COVID-19 related stressors may contribute to increased risk for suicide and how psychological flexibility/inflexibility may moderate this connection.

Psychological flexibility is the capacity to contact the present moment while also being aware of thoughts and emotions, without trying to change those private experiences or be adversely controlled by them. Depending upon the situation, a psychologically flexible individual might persist in or change their behavior in order to move towards their values.

Researchers measured psychological flexibility, interpersonal constructs, desire for death (active and passive suicidal ideation) and COVID-19 related stressors among a sample of 1,003 parents (*have at least one 5-18 year old child living in the home 3+ days a week*).

The study found psychosocial stressors of COVID-19 increase risk for suicide by increasing perceptions of burdensomeness. Research suggests that individual perceptions of burdensomeness are more likely to lead to suicide in the context of scarce resources available to family (e.g. low household income) or the community-wide pandemic threat. This association was strongest at high levels of psychological inflexibility and weak or non-significant at low levels of psychological inflexibility. Lack of behavioral control intensified the relationship between burdensomeness and suicidal ideation.

These findings highlight psychological inflexibility as a key risk factor that can exacerbate the effects of COVID-19 stress on suicide risk. Results suggest promoting flexibility might be one way to reduce suicide risk during the pandemic. Conversely, reducing inflexible responses can be an important strategy to reduce the link between pandemic related stressors and self-evaluations of burdensomeness.

### Intersection of substance use and suicide: Understanding the connection

The Military Family Research Institute at Purdue University held its 11th annual Battlemind to Home Summit focused on reducing reintegration barriers for Veterans, service members and military families. CoE's own [Lisham Ashrafioun, Ph.D.](#), participated in a panel discussing the "Intersection of Substance Use and Suicide: Understanding the Connection."

Dr. Ashrafioun's presentation outlined the intersection of pain, opioid use and suicide among Veterans. Not only did he highlight work that CoE investigators have conducted, he also shared VHA measures being taken to reduce suicide risk among Veterans with opioid use disorders, including the promising evaluation of those strategies.

## Linking the impact of psychological inflexibility on college students' sleep problems and depressive symptoms

While sleep problems and depressive symptoms, including suicidal ideation, are strongly associated, the mechanisms through which sleep might be linked with depressive symptoms and suicidal thoughts remain unclear.

Wilfred Pigeon, Ph.D., alongside others, examined how changes in psychological flexibility/inflexibility might act as potential mediators between changes in college students' sleep quality and depressive symptoms, including suicidal ideation.

Analyses indicated undergraduates' sleep disturbance was a significant predictor of their depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation via changes in their levels of psychological inflexibility. Increased sleep disturbance was associated with increased psychological inflexibility, which in turn was related to increases in both depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation.

In addition to addressing students' sleep problems directly, improving students' psychological flexibility may also diminish the impact that poor sleep has on their mental health problems.



## EDUCATION & DISSEMINATION DIVISION

### Advanced Postdoctoral Fellowship Program in Veteran Mental Health and Suicide

Sponsored by the VA Office of Academic Affiliations, the CoE's two-year postdoctoral fellowship program is designed to provide psychologists and physicians with the experience necessary to become leaders and innovators in suicide prevention research among Veterans. Consistent with the strategic mission of our Center, **our fellowship program puts primary emphasis on public health approaches to suicide prevention** in a vibrant interdisciplinary setting that fosters rich and creative collaborations with investigators and clinical supervisors from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, medicine, nursing, social work, epidemiology and health services.

To accomplish this, we combine the robust research and education resources of the CoE and the affiliated University of Rochester Department of Psychiatry (URMC Psychiatry) with the unique clinical and crisis response programs at the Canandaigua VA Medical Center (CVAMC).

Applications for the upcoming program are due by **January 4, 2021**. For more information on eligibility requirements and/or the fellowship program as a whole, please [visit the CoE website](#).

**ADVANCED POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP  
IN VETERAN MENTAL HEALTH AND SUICIDE PREVENTION**

The Center of Excellence for Suicide Prevention's two-year fellowship program is designed to provide psychologists and physicians with the experience necessary to become leaders and innovators in suicide prevention research among Veterans. Consistent with the strategic mission of our Center, our fellowship program puts primary emphasis on public health approaches to suicide prevention in a vibrant interdisciplinary setting that fosters rich and creative collaborations.

**Our Research**

Fellows collaborate with investigators and clinical supervisors from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, medicine, nursing, social work, epidemiology and health services.  
*Meet the Investigators currently accepting fellows for the 2021-23 program!*

- Nicholas Allan, Ph.D.**  
targets brief interventions addressing risk factors for mood, anxiety, substance use and suicide-related outcomes.
- Tracy Stecker, Ph.D.**  
aims to increase help-seeking behavior and mental health treatment engagement.
- Robert Bossarte, Ph.D.**  
focuses on predictive modeling for suicide risk and integration of big data analytics into mental health practice.
- Todd Bishop, Ph.D.**  
examines the sleep-suicide relationship, particularly the influence sleep disturbance has on suicidal behaviors.
- Elizabeth Karas-Plato, Ph.D.**  
studies the use of communication strategies in public health approaches among at-risk Veterans.
- Ludiam Ashrafsohn, Ph.D.**  
conducts overlapping research on chronic pain management and substance use, particularly opioid misuse and mitigation.

**Program Eligibility**

Prospective Ph.D. applicants must have completed a doctoral degree program in clinical or counseling psychology, as well as a doctoral internship in psychology.

Prospective MD or DO applicants must have completed a residency and be board certified or board eligible in their medical specialty.

Applications due **JANUARY 4, 2021** and can be found on the CoE website.

**Fellowship Training Directors**

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VA <https://www.mtrecc.va.gov/suicideprevention/education/fellowship.asp>

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