

Media Release

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People who feel too specialised to transfer occupations may be at an increased risk of suicide-related thinking and behaviour

People who believe their occupational skills are non-transferable to other professions are potentially at an increased risk of suicide-related thinking and behaviour, a Macquarie University study has found. The study is the first to investigate how a person's perceived skill transferability is linked to suicide-related thinking and behaviour, and has implications for clinical practitioners, human resource managers, and training institutions, such as universities.

"In this research, our team considered the role of skill transferability in potentially restricting a person's ability to change occupation," explained lead author Dr Monique Crane from Macquarie University.

"The study looked at how apparent it is to a person that their skill-set can be applied to other occupations – their own perception of their skills' transferability. We considered the possibility that if there was a strong desire to change professions, but the person believes their skill-set is not valued or readily transferable within other occupational settings, this contributes to increased suicidal thoughts and behaviours."

To test this suggestion, the researchers employed follow-up surveys to monitor the extent that suicidal thoughts and behaviours changed over 12 months in a group of 161 practicing veterinarians, aged between 22-79 years old. Veterinarians are known to be at a greater risk of suicide compared to the general population and are often distressed by occupational aspects such as the expectation to work long hours and poor remuneration. Further to this, their skill set is likely to be considered particularly narrow in terms of its application within the wider job market.

"The results of our study support the suggestion that when a person desires occupational mobility, but believes their skill set is not easily transferred to another profession, their experience of suicidal-related thoughts and behaviours will increase over 12 months. This was in contrast to those who wished to leave the profession and thought their skills were valued outside the veterinary profession. In these people, there was actually a decline in suicidal thinking and behaviours over 12 months. Thus, it appeared that perceived or actual professional mobility when desiring occupational change may play a role in suicide-related factors," said Dr Crane.

"We believe the results of the study can aid clinical practitioners and human resource managers in identifying behaviours and occupational features that might increase a person's suicide risk. Universities and other training institutions could also perhaps take some responsibility for normalising career change and helping students to think about their skills as having broader application," Dr Crane concluded.

Crane, Monique F; Phillips, Jacqueline K; Karin, Eyal. "I've been a long time leaving": The role of limited skill transferability in increasing suicidal ideation and self-harm behavior in veterinarians. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*. July 2016.

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