Autonomy and Older Men

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A study of 98 adults aged sixty and over showed that depression contributed to increased suicide risk only in men who also placed a high value on personal autonomy (described as “a cognitive style characterized by a high need for independence and achievement of goals or standards”). Suicide risk among older women was directly associated with greater levels of depression regardless of the value the woman placed on personal autonomy. The authors describe this relationship as one in which, for older men, a “greater value placed on autonomy amplified the relation between depressive symptoms and suicide risk.”

Suicide risk was measured by a history of suicidal ideation and attempts as well as the subjects’ judgment on whether they considered themselves likely to experience ideation or attempt suicide in the future.

The authors suggest that clinicians should be on the alert for older men who are depressed and who place a high value on autonomy. They suggest that a high value on autonomy may prevent men from seeking or accepting help for depression, physical ailments, and other problems that can contribute to suicide risk. Helping such men expand their problem-solving and help-seeking skills may help reduce their suicide risk.

The authors caution that their study did not determine whether valuing autonomy causes increased suicide risk, did not determine whether valuing autonomy is related to dying by suicide, and did not specifically identify mechanisms by which a high value on autonomy increased older men’s suicide risk.
