Psychology professor recognized for work in area of suicide prevention, self-injury

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EAU CLAIRE — Dr. Jennifer Muehlenkamp, a University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire assistant professor of psychology, has received the prestigious Edwin S. Shneidman Award from the American Association of Suicidology, recognizing her exceptional work in the areas of suicide prevention and self-injury among youth and young adults.

"This is an amazing honor as my work is being recognized by the premier organization devoted to understanding and preventing suicide," Muehlenkamp said. "Prior winners include top suicide researchers from universities such as Harvard and Columbia. Many past winners now are the leading experts in the field. There are many excellent suicide and self-injury researchers, so to be selected as someone whose work stands out in terms of quality, importance and impact in the field is meaningful. It shows that my work is making a difference in advancing our understanding of self-injury and suicide among youth, and that is very important to me."

The Shneidman Award is given to people who have made outstanding research contributions in the field of suicidology early in their careers. Recognized experts in the field nominate people for the award; nominees must be under age 40 and/or not be more than 10 years past their highest degree earned.

Muehlenkamp's primary expertise is in the area of non-suicidal self-injury, which includes behaviors such as self-cutting, burning of oneself, interference with wound healing and severe skin abrading like scratching skin with sharp objects to produce a wound.

"Nonsuicidal self-injury is a baffling and hard-to-treat phenomenon that has increased markedly in recent years," Muehlenkamp said.

Key issues in diagnosing and treating non-suicidal self-injury include differentiating it from attempted suicide and other mental disorders, as well as understanding the motivations for self-injury and the context in which it occurs, Muehlenkamp said.

"A lot of my early work focused on demonstrating that self-injury was different from non-lethal suicide attempts because people would often think self-injury was a suicide attempt,
and this contributed to inappropriate responses to the behavior and less effective treatments," Muehlenkamp said. "More recently, my work has examined the connection between self-injury and suicide by studying how self-injury can increase risk over the long term for suicide."

Muehlenkamp's research also has focused on developing and testing the theory that having poor attitudes toward and low regard for the body increases the likelihood someone would turn to self-injury to cope with distress.

"This newer line of research has a lot of promise for advancing the current theories that try to explain self-injury, and it offers some newer, creative venues to pursue for treatment and prevention," Muehlenkamp said.

Since coming to UW-Eau Claire, Muehlenkamp has worked with Counseling Services and undergraduate students to create a suicide awareness and gatekeeper prevention program on campus. She has worked to create a program that is based on existing research, as well as strategies to evaluate the program's effectiveness for UW-Eau Claire students.

"So far the results are promising," Muehlenkamp said of her efforts. "I've been trying to take my expertise and use it to make a difference on our campus and in the community. I've already offered a number of workshops to a variety of mental health professionals throughout the state on the topic of self-injury, and I hope to offer more as needed."

Muehlenkamp has included UW-Eau Claire undergraduate students in her ongoing research, and several of those students have now enrolled in graduate schools to continue their work in the areas of suicide prevention and self-injury, she said.

"This is really good for the field because we need more psychologists who are specifically trained to treat this behavior as well as continue the research," Muehlenkamp said.

Muehlenkamp's current team of student researchers will share their research project and findings during UW-Eau Claire's Student Research Day, April 30-May 2.

In addition to having her research published in professional journals, Muehlenkamp also was a co-author of a book titled "Nonsuicidal Self-Injury." The book provides practical and expert guidance on how to identify and treat nonsuicidal self-injury.

For more information about her research, contact Dr. Jennifer Muehlenkamp at 715-836-4642 or muehlejj@uwec.edu.

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