

The demands of
a "perfect" life
can send a young
woman into
a suicide spiral.

Gorgeous, Successful... and Wanting to Die

Lately, there's been a rash of shocking news reports on young, accomplished women who commit suicide. We consulted experts to uncover the hidden factors that may have led to their tragic deaths.

By Stacey Colino

Jessica Vashano was known as a generous people person. Although the pretty 27-year-old New York City resident was a busy investment banker, she spent hours of her own time organizing fund-raisers to aid the developing world and medical charities, as well as other causes.

Because she appeared so outgoing and connected, friends and colleagues were blindsided by the news they heard on December 18, 2010: That morning, Jessica jumped off the roof of a 40-story apartment building in Manhattan. She left no note, but it was later reported that she was being treated for depression.

Her suicide had family and friends struggling to make sense of it: Why would a successful young woman with her whole life ahead of her choose to end it all...and without reaching out for help?

Tragically, it's a question being asked more often these days. Although the rate at which young women are succumbing to suicide has remained steady—it's been the fourth leading cause of death among those ages 15 to 44 for the past few years—an increase in news reports about ambitious young women like Jessica who kill themselves has experts concerned.

The lives of driven, goal-oriented young women are becoming more hectic and isolated, due in part to a singular focus on career and a delay in developing a serious romantic relationship that can lead to feeling content and settled down. "This may put them increasingly at risk for the factors that contribute to suicide, most notably depression," explains Marjorie E. Weishaar, PhD, clinical professor of psychiatry and human behavior at the Alpert Medical School, at Brown University.

A single factor isn't usually enough to cause a woman to sink into a suicidal depression. What experts are discovering, however, is that the collusion of two or more triggers for a sustained period of time can set in motion a perfect storm of hopelessness, negativity, and emptiness whereby she may feel that death is her only escape.

A ROCKY TRANSITION TO THE REAL WORLD

As a kid living with your parents, you pretty much always know the "right thing" to do next: school, sports, clubs, internships, part-time jobs. And you have the day-to-



To others, it seemed like Jessica Fashano, 27, had everything.

day support of family and friends to fall back on if you feel down or unsure.

Then you're out on your own with no script to follow. And although most young women are prepared for things to be unpredictable, many find themselves realizing that the independent life is more overwhelming than they had anticipated, says Carol Landau, PhD, clinical professor of psychiatry and medicine at Alpert Medical School, at Brown University. There's no blueprint for happiness to go by, no map offering a shortcut to stability. The shakiness about what you're doing and where you're going amplifies feelings of fear and disenchantment that over time can lead to serious depression and suicidal thoughts, she adds.

Possibly magnifying these feelings, surprisingly, are social-networking websites like Facebook. Research suggests that seeing friends' status updates and wall posts might make you feel left behind, as if their lives are moving forward at a fast pace while yours is static. And strangely, Facebook also makes you feel disconnected.

This may have been the case with Jackie Imbro, 18, an attractive, upbeat freshman at the State University of New York at Albany. By all accounts,



Jackie Imbro, 18, posted one last cryptic message on Facebook.

she had a fantastic life: smarts, lots of friends, and a new guy who seemed to adore her.

But on the morning of February 2, 2011, Jackie hanged herself in her dorm room. The news left fellow students reeling. "I had seen her the night before, and it didn't seem like anything was wrong," recalls her friend, Erica

Brunelle, 19, also a SUNY freshman.

In the aftermath, a clue surfaced as to why she may have wanted to end her life. Jackie had recently hinted on her Facebook wall that she was feeling disillusioned—apparently with the people closest to her. "Look out for yourself 'cause no one else will," she had written. "She seemed to be saying that she couldn't trust anyone else, that she could only rely on herself because a lot of people in her life had hurt her," says Erica. Unfortunately, her cryptic post was either missed or disregarded.

THE DARK SIDE OF A PERFECT LIFE

Some women who are driven to be successful have impossibly high self-expectations and feel pressure to appear perfect in every respect. While this can be an effective motivator, it may also be emotionally damaging. "Perfectionism can make a young woman a standout in school and at work," says Weishaar. "But as soon as she begins to falter a bit, as everyone does—say, her job gets more difficult or she gains weight—she'll put herself through the wringer rather than look for a solution."

Instead of riding out a rough patch or giving themselves breathing room to trip up occasionally, women who are perfectionists punish themselves. "The depressed young women I work with are accomplished yet flooded with a sense that they'll never be good enough, that they're worthless," adds Weishaar.

Katrina Tagget, 21, who committed suicide in September 2008, fit this perfectionist profile. At Michigan State University, the bubbly, popular senior, who was called Kara by her friends, had a double major, a 4.0 GPA, and plans to go to law school. Yet despite her stellar record, she was plagued with high anxiety.

"She put enormous pressure on herself to excel," says her mother, Sara. The week before she died, Sara recalls, Kara began panicking about her course load, the LSATs, and her search for an internship. To relieve her stress, she partied heavily, using alcohol to numb her anxiety. Sara was so worried when her daughter told her what she was going through that she privately asked one of Kara's close friends if she should



Katrina Tagget, 21, felt crushed by the pressure to succeed.

come for a visit; the friend didn't think it was necessary.

That friend was wrong: On September 20, 2008, after a football tailgate, Kara took a gun from a different friend and shot herself outside that friend's off-campus apartment.

WHEN LOVE DOESN'T MATERIALIZE

Although the total number of women who take their own lives each year hasn't increased, new research by Leslie Beth Wish, EdD, a psychologist in Sarasota, Florida, shows that suicide attempts by women dissatisfied in love are on the upswing.

Why now? It may have to do with what Kay Hymowitz, author of *Manning Up*, calls the rise of the man-

child: a guy in his 20s or 30s who, thanks to changes in gender expectations over the past decade, feels little desire to partner up and get married, let alone enter into a relationship.

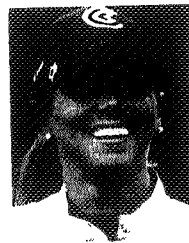
"By their mid- to late 20s, college-educated women are thinking hard about marriage and children because they're aware that their fertility will start to decline, yet guys remain focused on casual hookups and partying," says Hymowitz. "The lack of serious male partners has young women frustrated about their prospects of settling down." That frustration can lead to a hopelessness that may compel a woman to think she'll always be partnerless and that life may not be worth living because of it.

Hopelessness brought on by a broken heart appears to have been the

reason behind the suicide of Erica Blasberg. A pro golf star, Erica was talented and beautiful. At 25, she had earned enough money to buy a house outside Las Vegas, where she lived with her beloved Yorkie, Wynston.

On May 9, 2010, Erica was scheduled to leave for a tournament in Alabama. When a friend arrived at her house to check on her, he found her lifeless in bed, a plastic bag over her head. An autopsy revealed that she had taken a toxic amount of sedatives.

In a suicide note, Erica allegedly wrote that she felt alone. It was later reported that she had been struggling with anxiety and insomnia, both of which may have intensified after a messy breakup with a married man.



Erica Blasberg, 25, reportedly left a note saying she was tired of being alone.

HIDDEN DEPRESSION HITS HARD

It's well known that suicide is linked to depression, says Landau. What is alarming, however, is that experts believe many young females who kill themselves have undiagnosed depression. The disease often remains hidden for two reasons: A woman doesn't recognize the symptoms, or the stigma of mental illness scares her away from getting counseling or medication.

Thing is, it's hard to recognize when someone is truly sick. "Depression in young women can present itself less as overall sadness and more in the form of sleeplessness, mood swings, low energy, a change in appetite, crippling anxiety, or feeling totally checked out," says Landau. "These traits are so common during the young-adult years that it's difficult to realize that if they continue for more than two weeks, they can be signs of a serious illness."

Caitlin Walker knows this firsthand: After her 27-year-old sister, Alexis, ended her life by shooting herself in the head in October 2009, Caitlin uncovered clues that suggested Alexis was dealing with hidden depression.

"Alexis was gorgeous and popular and loved her work as a medical assistant," recalls Caitlin, 26. "But she suffered from highs and lows that made her pull away from others." A breakup with her boyfriend and recent weight gain likely left Alexis overwhelmed, Caitlin believes. "If I had known Alexis was depressed, we would have gotten her into counseling," says Caitlin. "But I don't think even she saw the signs or knew that help was available."

When you're alone, tell her, "I'm worried because you seem disconnected. Please tell me what's going on." Knowing you care can convince her to open up.

It's often tough for a suicidal person to take that first step to seeing a professional.

Gathering the names of local psychologists gets the ball rolling.

Call her a day later to see how she is and if you can help. Should she brush you off, say "If anything happened to you, I'd be devastated." Hearing that may make all the difference.

If she admits she wants to end it all or jokes that her life is worthless, call 911, take her to the emergency room, or contact her family.

Approach a trusted friend or family member, and tell him or her how you've been feeling. You may try to talk yourself out of interactions like these by assuming that you're a burden to them or they don't care, but your thinking may be skewed right now.

If you feel sad, empty, or hopeless and these emotions don't lift after two weeks, seek out a counselor. Also, steer clear of alcohol or drugs—they can darken your thoughts and make you feel more despondent.

Should you feel any impulse to harm yourself, call 911 and let the operator know you need help, head to the ER, or dial the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK.

SOURCES: PAULA CLAYTON, MD, MEDICAL DIRECTOR FOR THE AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION; MARJORIE E. WEISHAAR, PHD