

ASU graduate's research on suicidal thoughts calls attention to the role of online forums

Dean's Medalist Marc Palma became interested in studying psychology after seeing his friends struggle with their mental health post-pandemic

By Cynde Cerf, ASU News
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Editor's note: This story is part of a series of profiles of notable [spring 2026 graduates](#).

As a student at Washington High School in Phoenix, Marc Palma envisioned a career in engineering: "Mainly aerospace engineering, designing things like spacecraft and rockets," he recalls. "I really enjoyed mathematics and found myself rather good at it."

COVID-19 brought him back to Earth.

"A lot of my friends at the time began to struggle with their mental health, and I began to ask, 'Why is this happening?' 'What can I do to help?'"

Palma says witnessing those struggles shifted his focus from equations to empathy — and inquiry.

"I wanted to understand more about the human brain and how it functions. My interest in psychology and my desire to be able to use it to help people really snowballed," he says.

He enrolled in [Barrett, The Honors College](#), majoring in [psychology](#) with a minor in [counseling and applied psychological science](#) at the [School of Counseling and Counseling Psychology](#).

(Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rI_fUjv182I)

Working toward his bachelor's degree, he carried out a research study investigating factors that contribute to suicidal thoughts. That study became his Barrett undergraduate honors thesis — “The Cyclical Model of Suicide: Describing suicide in a censorship-free environment” — which is undergoing revisions pending publication in [The British Journal of Clinical Psychology](#). It was also the basis of [an article he wrote](#) for December's journal of The British Psychological Society.

Palma had the idea to analyze public posts from a large suicide online discussion forum with more than 150,000 users. This uncensored data allowed him to examine in-the-moment accounts of distress, decision reversal and other factors, and it led him to emphasize a critical need for policymakers, practitioners and researchers to be aware of these sites and their use by people in crisis in place of traditional therapeutic help.

“Getting to design my own study from inception to data collection, data analysis and then writing it up made me fall in love with the whole process,” Palma says.

Palma is being recognized as a distinguished graduate from the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts as a Dean's Medalist representing the School of Counseling and Counseling Psychology.

He credits the support and mentoring he received as he pursued his degree at ASU as the reason he is on the verge of being a published researcher in his field at the age of 22.

[Bryan Camp](#), an instructor in the School of Counseling and Counseling Psychology in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts, was one of those mentors.

“He showed me how research is a crucial aspect in psychology,” Palma says. “His classes inspired me to conduct my own research in the subfield I was interested in, suicidology, for my thesis.”

But doing the research, Palma learned, isn't the same as sharing it with the world, which is why he says his thesis chair, Clinical Associate Professor [Laura Jimenez Arista](#), was critical to his efforts. The director of undergraduate training for the Palma's school, Jimenez taught him one of the most impactful lessons he learned at ASU: “learning to take a chance on myself.”

Palma admits, “I've always had some self-doubt when it comes to the work I produce and how ‘good’ it really is. Working with Dr. Jimenez, I learned to trust in the quality of my work, while understanding that it can always be better, and to throw myself out there, sending the work to potentially be published or presented at big-name conferences. Her encouragement and constant reassurance has made me more confident in not only my academic work but also personally — something I will always be grateful for.”

Palma is considering his next step: a doctorate in psychology, or a master's in counseling or psychology, followed by a doctorate.

“My ultimate goal is to do some level of clinical work, which also involves continuing research, because I have fallen in love with the process,” he says. “I would also at some point consider teaching in academia.”

Whichever path he chooses, Palma will carry with him his ASU experience.

“It is nerve-racking and scary to put yourself out there and to go up to your professors or to engage in leadership positions,” he says. “What if you fail? What if you don't succeed? What if

you're judged? All of these are understandable fears that keep people from engaging in school beyond just class.

"But to get the most out of education as a whole and the university, you cannot let these fears stop you. Academia is much more than just attending classes and passing. It is engaging on a deep level with those peers around you, challenging yourself and not allowing yourself to simply cruise through for four years to get a degree."

Palma says failure leads to growth, and growth is success.

"That would be my advice: Throw yourself out there. Accept that you will fail at times, perhaps even a lot, but understand that failing is nothing to be sad about. To fail, you have to try, and to try is to do more than most," he said.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



ASU spring 2026 graduate Marc Palma is being recognized as a Dean's Medalist for the School of Counseling and Counseling Psychology in the College of Integrative Sciences and Arts. He is a major in psychology, with a minor in counseling and applied psychological science. Photo by Alyssa Thornhill/CISA