

Werther's Syndrome: Copycat Self-Immolation in Israel with a Call for Responsible Media Response

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Self-immolation is the act of setting oneself on fire, in the majority of cases with the intention of committing suicide, while expressing a social or political protest. The incidence varies among different cultures, religions and social-political climates. In developed countries it is considered a rare form of suicide (comprising 0.06–1% of all suicide cases), whereas in developing countries it occurs more frequently (up to 40% of all suicide cases) [1]. The first reported self-immolation was carried out by a Chinese monk in the 4th century and became a common form of protest by Buddhist monks until the 20th century [2]. As a common act of protest or as a symbol of religious devotion in Buddhism and Hinduism, self-immolation has become especially common in India, with a reported average of 1500 self-immolations a year in 2000 and 2001 [3].

The most famous case of self-immolation in recent years was that of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26 year old Tunisian street vendor who set fire to himself in December 2010 in the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, in protest against persecution by the authorities. His act of self-immolation leading to his subsequent death, defined by most as an act of suicide, set off riots around Tunisia which effectively brought about a civilian uprising that spread

throughout the Arab world and became known as the “Arab Spring.”

Bouazizi's act received massive media coverage worldwide. He was hailed by Arab commentators as a “hero” and a “martyr,” and his act was reported extensively in the western media as well. *TIME* magazine named Bouazizi “Person of the Year” for 2011, describing him as a “martyr who brought the Arab world down to its knees” [4].

Most recently in Israel, Moshe Silman, a 57 year old social activist with financial and health problems, set himself alight on 14 July 2012 during a protest rally in Tel Aviv against government social policy. His act received wide media coverage. Photographs of Silman setting himself on fire were published extensively and his desperate act appeared on the front page of every daily newspaper. A journalist from a leading newspaper wrote: “He made the sensible decision from his point of view. It was the only option... while the flames engulfed his body; while he was in agonizing pain... he didn't cry out, he was smiling...” [5]. Another leading journalist wrote of Silman's choice: “Moshe Silman didn't have any other option, in the choice between being a dead man walking or truly dead, he chose the option that would salvage some remains of his dignity... by doing nothing, the authorities are responsible for every burned piece of skin, every laceration of his aching soul which brought him to the furnace of hell” [6]. Another quote from a local prominent newspaper and journalist (Gideon Levy of *Haaretz*) presented Silman as being a “strong

person... fighting to the end... a soldier who fell in battle, in contrast to the weak ones, who deteriorate to poverty” [7].

Media coverage of suicide acts has been found to be significantly related to an increase in the rates of copycat suicide. This phenomenon is known as the “Werther effect” [8], alternately referred to as “Werther's syndrome.” The phenomenon was first elucidated by David Phillips in 1974 [9] and refers to the trend noted throughout Europe in the 18th century and considered to be a consequence of Goethe's novella *The Sorrows of the Young Werther* (1774). In Goethe's book, the main protagonist, Werther, experiences a failed romance with Charlotte, a woman who was already engaged to marry another man. Once Werther recognized that he had no chance of winning her over, he put an end to his life. The book became very influential and, apart from inspiring a fashion of yellow pants, blue jackets and open-necked shirts, led to several hundred copycat suicides among young men. While relatively little is known about the psychological processes and individual vulnerabilities that lead some to engage in suicidal behavior after exposure to media presentations of suicides, at least one assessment of emotional and cognitive reactions resulting from exposure has indicated that emotional reactivity and higher dissociation tendencies may be significant risk factors of the phenomenon [10]. It was also suggested by Phillips [11] that many commit suicide in this copycat fashion following the realization that subsequent media coverage of a celebrity suicide indicated that

instead of being censured, the individual committing suicide is in many ways lauded and granted respect, status and admiration that many did not enjoy in life. Thus, with the media-induced removal of the social stigma associated with suicide, a distinct level of disinhibition emerges, culminating in the increased incidence of copycat suicides. Interestingly, the phenomenon even extends to accessing information about any one particular case. For example, in Austria it has been shown that there is a strong correlation between suicide by firearm following a celebrity suicide and distribution of the newspaper describing the intimate details of the case [12]. The Werther effect lies in distinct contrast to the “Papageno effect,” where the media may exert a protective effect against suicide [13,14]. This latter effect is based on Papageno, a central character in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* who becomes suicidal due to fear of losing his much loved Papagena. As a result of the influence of three boys who convince him that there are other ways of coping with such loss he is able to desist from the suicidal act [13].

The copycat suicides, also known as suicide contagion, tend to be similar to the original act in the mode of suicide and demographics of the index case. One example is the town Bridgend in Wales where, since 2007, dozens of teenagers aged 13–17 committed suicide, most of them by hanging. Several other potential cases of Werther’s syndrome have been suggested and noted by many in recent years, prompted by the suspected suicide of a celebrity, for example, the American rock singer Kurt Cobain (of Nirvana fame) who shot himself in 1994 [15], Marilyn Monroe who probably died following an overdose of barbiturates in 1962, and the popular Japanese singer Yukiko Okada who threw herself from a seven-story building in 1986 [16]. The Werther effect was also applied to the phenomenon of “assisted suicide” following the suicide of a well-known couple from a prominent and wealthy family in Basel, Switzerland [17].

Suicide by self-immolation seems to be especially prone to igniting copycat suicides. The act is usually perceived as an act of heroism, aimed at a common target, and generally occurs during times of crisis and hostility towards authorities. During the 6 months after Bouazizi’s act, at least 107 Tunisians self-immolated. In the days following Silman’s self-immolation a number of copycat attempts (at least 10 reported in the media) to self-immolate took place in Israel, including many threats, a few actual attempts which were thwarted at the last minute by bystanders, and at least one successful self-immolation resulting in severe burns, a comatose state and subsequent death.

The response to Silman’s act stands in stark contrast to a previous similar act of protest in Israel. It turns out Moshe Silman was not the first to self-immolate in the country. A 54 year old woman, Yelena Bosinova, from the Gaza settlement K’dumim set herself on fire in 2005 during the ‘Disengagement’ and uprooting of the Jewish presence in the Gaza Strip as an act of political protest and died shortly after [18]. Her act received only minimal press coverage, with no pictures published. No known copycat immolations followed her act. Her immolation remains in distinction to Silman’s – a widely publicized act in the media with a number of subsequent copycat cases.

In an attempt to curb the media’s influence in encouraging copycat suicides, the World Health Organization published guidelines aimed at creating “responsible reporting.” The WHO Media Guidelines include recommendations such as using the opportunity to educate the public about suicide, avoiding sensationalized reports or presenting it as a solution to problems, avoiding prominent placement of stories about suicide, avoiding explicit description of the method used, caution in using photographs or film footage, and taking particular care when reporting celebrity suicides [19,20]. In order to prevent the

potential for copycat suicides in such situations, the Centers for Disease Control in the U.S. has suggested that the media refrain from offering simplistic explanations for suicide and from reporting suicide in a repetitive or disproportionate manner. In addition, they recommend that the media desist from portraying suicide as a means of accomplishing certain goals or from glorifying persons who commit suicide and focusing on their positive qualities [21]. Subsequently, many countries have devised their own specific codes for the reporting of suicides, ranging from extreme measures, such as in Norway where media reports of suicide are prohibited, to more moderate recommendations. In Turkey, visual images of suicidal acts are not published [22]. To our knowledge, no such guidelines exist in Israel.

There is one additional clinical observation that should be considered. In people who self-immolate, death occurs at least a few days after the act. The majority of copycat cases seem to occur after the death of the individual, and only to a lesser extent after the act of burning. For example, Bouazizi self-immolated on 17 December 2010 and died on 4th January 2011. Based on news reports, the first self-immolation after Bouazizi took place on 13 January and many more followed after that index event. Similarly, the majority of copycat self-immolation threats or attempts in Israel took place after Silman’s death. This could be of value when trying to understand the cause for copycat cases, and could also be relevant if one tried to predict the most sensitive periods from the media coverage point of view.

The specific case of self-immolation poses a considerable challenge to the media. While the act itself is relatively rare, the visual effect is striking and dramatic. This generally transpires against a background of significant social or political disturbance, usually with the objective of serving as a catalyst for subsequent major political change. All this transforms the deed into an under-

standably sensational scoop for any journalist. It is essential that the media assume responsibility for the profound role they may play in such situations. Several studies have noted that media reporting of celebrity suicides is liable to trigger an increase in suicides in certain population subgroups, resulting in some countries introducing guidelines that have proven to have mitigated “the Werther effect” [23].

The intention of this report is not to comment on the mental status of those specifically involved in the current wave of copycat self-immolations or threats, but rather, in light of the public health benefit, to note the phenomenon and subsequent dangers in response to it. Guiding principles must be clearly delineated and publicized. Increased awareness by journalists and other professionals working in the media to the possible consequences of unwarranted and sensationalistic reporting could serve to reduce further gratuitous loss of human life.

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