

Naked Suicide

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Suicide attempts and completions by individuals while naked remain unexplored, both by clinicians and in the professional literature. Nakedness at the time of the incident conveys important information about an individual's mental state. Motivations for attempting or completing suicide while naked are discussed. Nakedness during a suicide attempt is presumptive evidence of high risk for suicide completion. Deliberate self-harm, without intent to die, is not usually inflicted while naked. The clinical and forensic implications of naked suicide are explored. In completed suicides, the state of dress, including partial undress and nakedness may provide important clues in a psychological autopsy. Forensic psychiatrists and treating clinicians who encounter naked suicides are afforded a unique opportunity to advance our knowledge. Letters to the editor and case reports would stimulate discourse about this little understood phenomenon.

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Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked I shall return.—Job 1:21

Marilyn Monroe was found lying nude, face down, with a sheet pulled over her dead body.¹ After much publicity and controversy, the coroner ruled that she had died of acute barbiturate poisoning by overdose. The controversy about the cause of her death continues to this day.

The naked body of Robert Maxwell, billionaire British tycoon, was found floating some distance from his yacht in the waters off Grand Canary Island. Maxwell was facing a scandal on his return to England involving the disappearance of corporate assets and pension fund monies. Although his death was ruled an accidental drowning, there was much doubt about the cause of his death. Theories of his demise included murder, suicide, heart attack, and accident.¹

Cleopatra completed suicide shortly after Mark Antony fell on his sword. The legend is that she committed suicide by allowing herself to be bitten by a poisonous snake, an asp. A famous painting by the French artist Jean André Rixens (1846–1924) depicts Cleopatra lying naked in her death bed. A painting by Reginald Arthur (1892) entitled *The Death of Cleopatra* shows Cleopatra partially naked. Plutarch,² who wrote about Cleopatra many years after her death, described her as “Stone-dead, lying

upon a bed of gold, set out in all her royal ornaments.”

The psychiatric and forensic literature is mostly silent on the topic of naked suicide. A Google search for “suicide naked” revealed some anecdotal comments by bloggers and a spate of newspaper stories about individuals who had jumped to their deaths while naked. A PubMed search found no information on naked suicide. The author interviewed forensic psychiatrists, general psychiatrists, coroners, and forensic pathologists. A review of textbooks on suicide and forensic pathology was conducted. Little or no information was found from any source about naked suicide. The author's review of suicide cases in litigation revealed that an estimated five to eight percent had completed suicide while naked. The percentage of all suicides that are completed while naked is unknown.

Given the dearth of information available about naked suicide, this article is offered as an initial exploration of this topic. It is hoped that letters to the editor and case reports in response will stimulate discourse about this little understood phenomenon.

Autoerotic Asphyxia or Naked Suicide?

Autoerotic asphyxia is the use of strangulation to enhance the pleasure of masturbation.³ It is usually practiced by white, middle-class men younger than 30 who do not have a history of mental illness. The bodies are often found naked or in various states of undress. Props such as sexual aids, pornographic magazines, or women's clothing are present. Transvestism occurs in a minority of cases. Strangulation

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death occurs when a rigged self-safety release mechanism fails. The purpose of autoerotic asphyxia is to achieve a more powerful orgasm, but not to die.

Autoerotic asphyxia is also practiced by women, although less commonly than men. A study of fatal and near-fatal autoerotic asphyxia revealed that homicide, suicide, and accidental death were erroneously suspected initially.⁴ Only a few of the women used props, devices, or unusual clothing. Most of the bodies were found completely naked. The authors underscored the subtle features of this practice in women and the underdiagnosis and confusion with nonaccidental death. Nonetheless, autoerotic asphyxia may be the route that a person takes who intends to commit suicide. A naked strangulation with all the indicia of autoerotic asphyxia may still be a suicide, not an accident.

Conventional wisdom has it that a woman found hanging naked is most likely a homicide or a staged suicide.⁵ It is thought that “feminine modesty” carries over into a suicidal death. Nonetheless, women do hang themselves or induce asphyxia by other means while naked.

Paradoxical Undressing

Wedin *et al.*⁶ described a phenomenon called “paradoxical undressing.” They reported 33 cases of fatal hypothermia evenly distributed by sex, age, and geography. The cases usually occurred on open land during the winter months. Arteriosclerosis and chronic alcoholism were associated illnesses. The authors hypothesized that the paradoxical undressing could be explained by peripheral vasoconstriction in severely hypothermic individuals. Just before losing consciousness and death, these individuals feel overheated and discard their clothing. There is no suicidal intent.

Disrobing

Clothes may be partially or completely removed to facilitate the method of suicide. For example, the individual may remove or reposition clothing to expose the wound site.⁷ A shirt may be removed to make hanging easier or to be used as a noose. Individuals who engage in autoerotic asphyxia may partially disrobe, sometimes causing confusion about the type of death (suicide or accidental), especially in the absence of erotic paraphernalia.

The disposition of clothing found at the site of a naked suicide attempt or completion can yield valuable clues to the individual’s mental state. Clothes that are neatly arranged point to a planned suicide. Clothes strewn about raise the question of impulsivity or mental disorganization secondary to a severe psychiatric condition, substance abuse, or sexual homicide.

Nakedness in suicide attempts or completions in a tub or shower may seem incidental, since people take their clothes off to enter a tub or shower. Nonetheless, knowing that one’s body will be found naked and taking the trouble to remove clothing has psychological import. The state of an individual’s clothing, including partial undress and nakedness, can provide important clues in a psychological autopsy.

Method of Death

Naked suicide can be associated with any method of suicide; however, anecdotal evidence indicates that it occurs more frequently with hanging, overdose, or drowning, but to a lesser extent in jumping deaths. With the exception of jumping, most naked suicides occur indoors.

Naked suicide appears to be less common in suicides by gas asphyxiation. Still, the act may be associated with asphyxiation, especially if it is sexualized. For example, a couple may decide to complete suicide by carbon monoxide and engage in sexual activity before death ensues. However, a naked couple engaged in sex may die accidentally from a gas leak—for example, in a car with closed windows.

Naked drowning, as occurred with Robert Maxwell, occurs infrequently, except when drowning takes place in a bathtub. Suicidal drowning in a bathtub or pool tends to be achieved when individuals are partially or totally naked. Encumbering clothes are doffed before immersion.

A recent spate of individuals who jumped to their deaths when naked has been reported in the media.⁸ Psychosis, substance abuse, or intoxication should be suspected in individuals who jump or threaten to jump naked from a building or bridge. Auditory hallucinations may command the individual to attempt suicide by jumping while naked.

Most firearm suicides occur by gunshots to the head. In such cases, disrobing is unusual.

“Tidy” suicides can be an occasion for nakedness at death. Some individuals, before completing suicide by firearm or deep cutting, arrange the suicide so

Table 1 Naked Suicide: Some Psychological Themes

Rebirth and cleansing
Self-abasement (masochistic surrender)
Atonement (guilt)
Exhibitionism
Eroticization of death
Anger, to “shock” survivors
Impulsivity (while incidentally undressed)
Tidiness (no mess)
Disorganization (or intoxication)
Psychosis (command hallucinations, mania)

that it does not create a “mess” for their survivors. Individuals may also disrobe to avoid leaving bloody clothes. Tidy suicides take place mostly in a bathroom, usually in a tub or shower.

Impulsivity may be a factor in naked suicides. Most individuals spend at least some part of each day naked. An impulse to commit suicide may strike while the individual is naked. In their study of suicides, Simon *et al.*⁹ found that 25 percent of individuals studied made attempts within 5 minutes of having suicidal ideation.

Why Naked Suicide?

Little is known about the reasons why individuals attempt or complete suicide while naked. Suicide notes rarely indicate a reason for a naked suicide. Knowledge gained from the treatment of patients, however, can shed light on the motivation for naked suicide. As mentioned earlier, individuals who have made suicide attempts while naked are the best source of information. Table 1 lists some psychological themes that may be associated with naked suicide.

Approximately 95 percent of completed suicides are associated with mental illness.¹⁰ Naked suicide, by itself, does not suggest a specific mental disorder. As noted above, individuals who jump to their deaths naked may be psychotic. The psychodynamics of a naked suicide often remain opaque.

Naked suicide suggests a variety of psychological themes. The shedding of clothes may symbolize a new beginning, a rebirth and cleansing, or a sloughing off of the world. In the biblical description of Christ’s resurrection, his clothes, a symbol of an unregenerate world, were left behind as he ascended into heaven.¹¹

Anger and vengeance can be expressed by completing suicide while naked, especially when it is in-

tended to traumatize a survivor. The shock of discovering a naked suicide inflicts an indelible, traumatic memory that can haunt a survivor for a lifetime.¹² The person who completes suicide while naked may intend to add insult to a suicide survivor’s already devastating injury.

In severely depressed individuals, a naked suicide may be an expression of vulnerability, utter despair, desolation, and worthlessness. Psychotic patients may be responding to delusions or auditory hallucinations commanding them to commit suicide while naked as a self-abasement.

In an illustrative case example, a suicidal psychiatric inpatient with a psychotic depression (case disguised) believed that he was the cause of the world’s calamities. During suicide risk assessment, it was discovered that the patient planned a naked suicide to atone for his “sins” by becoming a “sacrificial lamb, shorn of my clothes.”

Marilyn Monroe, an American sex idol, was admired by many for a physical beauty that defined her life. Her naked death led to speculation of foul play with erotic overtones. Was it a naked suicide? Was her nakedness caused by disorientation from a drug overdose? To complicate matters, Monroe slept naked.

Naked suicide may represent an eroticized submission to life’s exigencies. Rixens’ portrait of a naked Cleopatra depicts her suicide as a surrender to fate. The sexual symbolism of completing suicide by being bitten by an asp while lying naked in bed is obvious. It is as if Cleopatra’s beauty and sexual charisma were incorporated into her suicide, an example of death imitating life.

The significance of Robert Maxwell’s naked drowning is a mystery. Maxwell was an extremely complex man, full of contradictions and mood swings. He invented and reinvented himself. Many details of his life, some extravagant, were unsubstantiated. He changed his name several times. A billionaire tycoon, he had survived several scandals. He relished challenges. With an extensive scandal gaining steam in England, Maxwell would have had to face hard questions about his background and true identity, as well as shame, humiliation, and imprisonment for his financial misdeeds.

Would a man who was so determined to have the respect of those in power and to preserve his hard-won persona commit naked suicide? Or, did it make any difference? For example, did he think that

clothes would add buoyancy and interfere with an efficient drowning? Was his nakedness a symbol of his complete exposure? An autopsy preformed revealed a partially consumed banana in his stomach. The Spanish pathologist surmised that Maxwell could have slipped on a banana peel while naked, falling into the water and drowning. The official verdict was accidental drowning, but much doubt remains. Does Maxwell's nakedness send a message about his intent and mental state? The cause of death remains as enigmatic as Maxwell's life. A psychological autopsy may have found that Maxwell simply swam naked.

Clinical Implications

An individual who makes a suicide attempt when naked should be considered at high risk for suicide. In the author's clinical experience, deliberate self-harm behavior without intent to die are usually not inflicted while naked. Thus, the naked state may signal increased risk and reason for clinical concern after a suicide attempt. The clinician may learn of a patient's naked suicide attempt from rescue reports or from the patient. All patients should be asked about the details of the suicide attempt, including the patient's state of dress. Most patients will tell the clinician about a naked suicide attempt if asked, even when they downplay the significance of the attempt itself. A complete suicide risk assessment should include an inquiry into the psychological significance of a naked suicide attempt. These important questions usually are not asked.

Understanding the psychological meaning of a naked suicide can provide an opening for treatment. For example, when the suicide attempt is tidy, was the patient concerned about sparing significant others additional grief? Could that concern about not harming survivors be turned into a protective factor? Did the naked suicide attempt occur impulsively while the individual was undressed, leaving no time for "second thoughts" and rescue? Can the individual learn coping skills that may prevent another impulsive suicide attempt? Medication management of impulsivity is an additional option. Does a naked suicide attempt reflect problems with body image that can become a focus of treatment?

An individual who makes a naked suicide attempt that symbolically expresses regressive rebirth fantasies should be considered to be at high risk for suicide, requiring further systematic assessment. The

individual's intent is to escape to a new and better life through death.

This clinical point is illustrated in a case in which a patient in psychotherapy (case disguised) discovered that her naked suicide attempt in a bathtub full of water was a rebirth and reunion fantasy with her mother, who had completed suicide by drowning when the patient was nine years old. The therapy was successful in helping the patient cope more effectively with the grief surrounding her mother's suicide.

Forensic Implications

In suicide malpractice cases and other litigation, attorneys may ask the expert about the significance of a naked suicide. The expert may or may not have an opinion. Information about the suicide is usually available through multiple collateral sources such as depositions, medical and psychiatric treatment records, coroner's reports, photographs, toxicology, and other data. But as the cases about to be described demonstrate, extensive collateral information may not provide insight into a naked suicide. In contrast, although extensive collateral information may be unavailable to the clinician treating a patient who has made a naked suicide attempt, an in-depth scrutiny of the psychological meaning of the patient's attempt may reveal the driving underlying intent and fantasies.¹³ Forensic experts may be asked to opine whether a person's naked death was a suicide or an accident (e.g., lethal autoerotic asphyxia). In criminal cases, the expert may also be able to give an opinion as to whether a naked death was a suicide or a murder masquerading as a suicide.¹⁴

Three of the author's cases of naked suicide are briefly discussed in the context of suicide litigation.

Case 1

A severely depressed female physician hanged herself while naked from a pipe in her hospital room on the psychiatric unit. Extensive collateral information did not reveal the motive for the naked suicide (e.g., depositions of physicians, family, and friends). Neither party to the ensuing litigation questioned why the patient completed suicide when naked. When the attorneys were asked about their opinions, they merely shrugged their shoulders. The patient's nakedness was not an issue in the litigation. The initial psychiatric assessment and progress notes by the defendants revealed no clinical information that could

help explain the naked suicide. The case was settled, but not for this author. The naked suicide became a compelling curiosity and motivation for this article.

Case 2

A male patient in his early 20s was found hanging naked in the shower of his hospital room on the psychiatric unit. A small amount of water was found on the floor of the shower. Extensive collateral information shed no light on the reason for the patient's naked suicide. The patient's nakedness became an issue in the litigation when attorneys for the defendant psychiatrist and hospital asserted that the patient had probably died from a failed autoerotic asphyxia attempt. The plaintiff's attorney countered that there was no evidence of an autoerotic asphyxia death. The case was settled.

Case 3

A middle-aged woman was assessed in a hospital emergency room (ER) for severe depression with auditory hallucinations commanding suicide. Collateral sources of information were not obtained. She was discharged from the ER, went home, and hanged herself naked in a closet. Her nakedness was not questioned in the legal case. The ER records were unrevealing. No party to the case questioned why the patient completed suicide naked. The motivation for completing naked suicide remained a mystery. The case was settled.

Cases with possible forensic implications can also be found in the media. An article in *The Washington Post*¹⁵ read:

D.C. police believe a naked construction worker who fell to his death this week slipped and fell four stories down an elevator shaft. Authorities said it was unclear why he was naked. . . . Police have classified the incident as a death investigation for now and are awaiting results from the D.C. Medical Examiner's office.

The conclusion that the construction worker slipped and fell¹⁶ does not explain why he was naked at a construction site and suggests the possibility of suicide not explicitly raised in the article.

A psychological autopsy may reveal the motive for a naked suicide. The method and state of dress during any suicide may be explained in an in-depth psychological understanding of the victim, often unavailable in the context of litigation. Detailed clinical information that helps in determining the motive for a naked suicide may be available from the clinician

who treated the patient. But even then, the act may defy explanation.

How will juries react to photos of a naked suicide offered in evidence? Some cases require display of photos of naked suicides in determining the cause of death in insurance litigation. Jurors may be shocked by photos of persons who have completed naked suicide but not necessarily biased against defendants in malpractice cases. Rule 403 of the Federal Rules of Evidence¹⁷ allows the court to exclude evidence if its probative value is substantially outweighed by the danger of prejudicing, confusing or misleading the jury.

Conclusions

What is the significance of naked suicide? Can the individual's nakedness provide insight into his or her psyche at the time of death? Can such knowledge assist clinicians in the treatment of patients who have attempted suicide while naked? Naked suicide attempts and completions remain largely unexplored, both by clinicians and in the professional literature. The percentage of suicides that are completed while naked is unknown. Individuals who make naked suicide attempts should be considered at high risk for suicide. In the author's clinical experience, deliberate self-harm behaviors are usually not inflicted while naked. Naked suicide attempts are high-risk events, especially when the underlying fantasy is death and rebirth.

A psychological autopsy may uncover the meaning of a naked suicide. In the mosaic of factors associated with suicide attempts and completions, nakedness or the state of dishabille is a piece, sometimes a critical piece, of evidence. Forensic psychiatrists and treating clinicians who encounter naked suicide attempts or completed suicides are afforded a unique opportunity to further the understanding of this little understood phenomenon.

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