

## Loss of loved one suicide

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Suicide has occurred in all regions and ethnic groups across time (Pridmore S, et al. 2020). During the 20<sup>th</sup> century medical authorities declared that suicide is always, or almost always, a consequence of mental disorder. This gave that profession great influence and status. However, the WHO described the belief as a myth (WHO, 2014), reducing some mystique and encouraging other scholars to consider human nature, local history, and folklore.

We have published reports of suicide being associated with negative life experiences: financial loss, public disgrace, long prison terms, forced marriage and painful physical ailments. We hesitate to continue adding to the list of negative life experiences which may end in suicide - we have already made the point that distress may be terminated by this mechanism. However, a couple of interesting points have recently emerged.

The first accounts of loss of a loved one triggering suicide came from Babylon, about 2000 BCE. Pyramus and Thisbe were lovers. They planned to meet in a park – Thisbe arrived first but frightened away by a lion. Then Pyramus arrived, saw the lion, assumed Thisbe had been killed and unable to tolerate the loss, stabbed himself to death. Thisbe returned, found her lover's corpse and unable to tolerate the loss, killed herself with the same instrument. Similar events occurred in Egypt in 30 BCE. Anthony and Cleopatra were lovers. Evidence suggested Cleopatra was deceased, which led Anthony to kill himself. However, Cleopatra was alive, and in consequence of the loss of her lover, arranged her own death using a poisonous snake. Two millennia - Sir Edward and Lady Joan Downes lived in London. When Lady Joan developed rapidly progressive pancreatic cancer in 2009, they both ended their lives at the Dignitas Clinic, Zurich.

'Rapunzel' is a story which possibly originated in Persia a thousand years ago. However, it comes to us from the German Grimm brothers, in their collection of fairy tales first released in 1812 (Grim and Grim, 1812). There are more details given in the original than are told in the recent versions.

Rapunzel was imprisoned in a tower by a wicked witch. A prince discovers her, they fall in love and she becomes pregnant. When the liaison is discovered by the jealous captor, the young captive is removed to a 'desolate land'. When the prince next returns, the witch reveals the new arrangements. "The prince was overcome with grief, and in his despair he threw himself from the tower." Using magic, the witch quickly arranged a profusion of thorns

bushes to appear around the base of the tower - the prince was not killed (only blinded by thorns). This was no suicidal gesture - this was failed suicide.

Rapunzel is a fairy story. But such creations tell us what has been acceptable and sensible to the authors and consumers of the time of their creation.

As we all know, on September 11, 2001, terrorists flew two planes into the World Trade Center buildings in New York. Two forms of suicide were immediately apparent. Nineteen terrorists suicided by remaining in crashing aircraft, apparently motivated by political/religious beliefs. About 200 people trapped above the fires fell or jumped from the buildings – many may have hoped to survive the descent, but it is probable that at least some would have anticipated death but chosen death by jumping from a height (suicide) rather than waiting to be inevitably burnt to death.

Joe Flounders worked as a bond broker on the 84<sup>th</sup> floor of the second tower to be struck. Joe married Pat (51 years) 21 years previously. They were a devoted couple. Pat had survived breast cancer and had recently had a pacemaker implanted. After the first (before the second) plane struck they spoke by telephone, Pat told Joe to get out of his building. He agreed, he is recorded as delaying his departure to help others. Joe's body was never found.

Pat was damaged by Joe's death. For many days she unreasonably hoped he had somehow survived. She lost weight, refused counselling and support. A few months after the attack Pat arranged a memorial service for her husband, at which she was described as "despondent". Within a fortnight she shot herself in the head with a pistol which they kept for personal protection. Her suicide can be attributed to the loss of her loved husband.

Thus, the loss of a loved one has been considered a potential suicide trigger across the last 4000 years. It has been described in folk and fairy tales, and clearly described newspapers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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