The Marilyn Monroe Group and the Werther Effect

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Abstract

Background: Emotional support is important after a tragedy but, in inexperienced hands, good intentions can go wrong.

Aim: To illustrate this point with the case of the "Marilyn Monroe group" convened in 1962.

Case Study: A short-lived inpatient group on a women's ward, intended to support patients grieving after the suicide of Marilyn Monroe, resulted in three suicide attempts, one very serious. All the patients thankfully survived, and important lessons were learned.

Conclusion: Bringing vulnerable people together to discuss a celebrity suicide can unintentionally glamorize the incident and lead to copycat events.

Keywords: Suicide; Group therapy; Werther effect

Case Study

On August 05, 1962, when I was beginning my 2nd year residency in psychiatry in a New York City hospital, Marilyn Monroe died from an overdose of barbiturates. She was a Hollywood superstar and a worldwide symbol of female desirability. Her suicide was widely publicized and the patients on my all women's hospital ward were devastated. Marilyn Monroe was a powerful role model, a girl who had risen from poverty and orphan status to dominance on the silver screen and who had captured the hearts and minds of world-renowned athletes, giant literary figures, movie greats, and very influential politicians, even the President of the United States. My supervisor was away on his summer vacation in August 1962 so I took the initiative to immediately convene a once a week therapy support group, the "Marilyn Monroe group". The aim of the group was to discuss this particular suicide and suicide in general, and to console one another through the sharing of feelings. All interested patients were welcome.

In hindsight, what happened next should have been foreseeable. Three of the women in the group attempted suicide in the weeks that followed, one very seriously. Fortunately, all three survived, but my supervisor, informed by the head nurse, returned in haste from vacation and I received an unforgettable dressing down. It was almost the end of my career in psychiatry.

I had, of course, thought I was doing good by providing emotional support to patients who were distressed by an event that affected them profoundly. My supervisor saw it as an unnecessary dwelling on an unfortunate event, paving the way to imitation in the same way that extensive media coverage does, the phenomenon now referred to as the Werther effect.

In 1774 at age 25, Goethe [1], who was to become Germany's most famous writer, was on the verge of suicide because of an unhappy love affair. To dissipate his sorrow, he wrote a book, The Sorrows of Young Werther, the tragic story of an unhappy lover who ends his life with a pistol. Writing the book was helpful to Goethe, it sublimated his personal troubles, but the book's popularity precipitated a wave of suicides in Germany and beyond. Masses of young men dressed in yellow pants and blue jackets (like Werther) and, carrying a copy of Goethe's novel, shot themselves.

The term, "Werther Effect" was not coined till 1974 [2], so I would not have known about it at the time of Marilyn Monroe's death. In fact, Durkheim, in his 1887 famous tract on suicide had underplayed the effect of imitation as a factor in suicide [3]. Durkheim thought it useless, for instance, to prohibit newspapers from publishing suicide stories. My supervisor, however, was right, there was something about bringing emotionally disturbed young women together to talk about suicide that encouraged them to try it themselves. I had unknowingly set the scene for a form of behavioral contagion [4] and created a suicide cluster [5-7]. Clusters are formed by contagion or imitation, or through suggestion and learning. Alternatively, they are pre-formed by assortative relating, meaning that the women who chose

to join the group were not a random group of people. They were all vulnerable to suicide well before the group started. Marilyn Monroe's death and the formation of the group had provided a sense of shared belongingness, a common purpose that served as the stimulus to the overt suicidal act [8-10]. Kern [11] had written in 1953 about the phenomenon of "psychic contagion". I should have known. In fact, in the two months following Marilyn Monroe's death, there were 303 excess deaths by suicide in the United States and 60 in the United Kingdom [2]. My Marilyn Monroe group, intended to be supportive and healing could be described as a suicide postvention gone wrong [12] that must have, in the eyes of the patients, romanticized Marilyn Monroe's death and made it seem worth imitating.

In more recent times, many have written about this effect, usually blaming the media for unnecessarily publicizing celebrity suicides [13-20].

Discussion

Stack [21] has elaborated on the theories of Tarde [22] to try to explain imitative suicide. According to Tarde, imitation consists of an inferior copying a superior, superior being understood in this connection as majority opinion, front page stories in newspapers for instance. Defining a celebrity as someone whose name has appeared in the New York Times in at least 2 of the 5 years preceding his or her death, Stack found that, the greater the number of column inches devoted to the suicide story, the greater the imitation. Film star suicide, according to Stack, is especially dangerous because, not only are actors celebrities in their own right, but also, by virtue of having played a number of different roles in a number of films, they represent numerous figures with whom to identify. In addition to appearance and character and occupation and nationality, the imitator may identify with the celebrity along age, gender, and race lines and along alleged explanations for the suicide – financial problems, mental illness, marital problems, poor health, alcohol and drug addiction.

In recent times, what people read on the Internet [23], or social media [24] is much more influential than are news media accounts. Celebrity suicides that receive the most tweets are followed by the greatest number of copycat suicides [24]. Entertainers' suicides appear to capture the public's imagination more than suicides of other elites. This is witnessed by the continuing fame of Marilyn Monroe and the obsession with her suicide 55 years after her death [25,26].

In conclusion, the story of the Marilyn Monroe group I formed when I was a young resident in psychiatry in 1962 is an example of good intentions gone wrong. Proper consultation with experienced elders would have prevented a colossal error.

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