

Letter to the Editor—Stuffed Toy Animals as Transitional Objects in an Adult Suicide

Sir,

We recently encountered a 33-year-old man who left unusual artifacts at his suicide. He had previously made a hole in the ceiling in the living room of his apartment and suspended a rope from a joist. His father discovered the apparatus and disassembled it. He criticized his son for erecting it, but no other intervention took place. A week later, the decedent restored the ligature and hanged himself from it by the neck. Before he died, he likewise hanged numerous toy stuffed animals that he had collected. He did not leave a suicide note.

Stuffed animals serve many roles in the lives of children and adults. In childhood, stuffed animals may be personified as objects of nurturing (1). They are thus considered transitional objects, in that they take the place of the mother–child bond. In adolescence, objects tend to be valued more for their function than for their symbolic value, although stuffed animals and other treasured objects that belong to females may still be valued for interpersonal meaning more than for function (2). In adulthood, stuffed animals may be used as countertransitional objects by parents in the care of high-risk infants, i.e., the objects are used to replace the maternal-child bond for the sake of the parent who is unable to provide direct care to an infant in intensive care (3). Among adult female inpatient psychiatric patients, borderline personality disorder has been found to be prevalent in patients who display stuffed animals in their hospital rooms (4).

Thus, the use of stuffed animals in different ways is common, although for a man at this age, such use is atypical. Such involved use of these objects may suggest an underlying personality or affective disorder, although none was explicitly diagnosed or treated. Certainly there were suggestions of a difficult social situation in

that no intervention took place when suicidal ideation and intention were discovered. The presence of hanged stuffed animals may also demonstrate regression to an immature or abnormal emotional state, in which the stuffed animals take on meaning beyond their objective or sentimental value. Indeed, the traditional transitional role of the objects may have been repeated, in that “killing” the toys represented loss of maternal/familial love and nurturing.

In addition to personification of the objects, there may have been identification with them, in which the toys became objects that the decedent “killed” so as to complete his suicide. Alternatively, the stuffed animals may have been symbolically “euthanized” so that he need not worry about their “care” after his death, an act that may take place with household pets.

As there are no notes or oral history to explain precisely the meaning of his stuffed animals to this man, we cannot be sure what role they played in his suicide. However, he went to such lengths to prepare them for his death, the objects appear to have facilitated his suicide, and left a poignant message of his despair to survivors.

References

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