

SUICIDE BY FIRE¹

By

Rebekah Doley BA(Hons) Grad Dip App Psych MSc(Inv Psy) MAPS²

The term “self-immolation” is mistakenly used to describe the act of suicide by fire. Immolation, in fact, refers to sacrificial killing by any means and is therefore not restricted to the use of fire. A more accurate description of the act is “self-incineration”. This discussion provides a brief overview of this complex topic in an effort to clarify some of the common misperceptions prevalent in this area.

Crosby, Rhee, and Holland (1997) provide a succinct account of the historical origins of self-incineration. As early as the fourth century BC, reports of individuals arranging for their own deaths on top of funeral pyres have been recorded. Later the practice became most commonly known as *suttee*, an ancient Indian rite requiring the surviving wife, providing she was childless, to be cremated along with her deceased husband. Widow-burning is erroneously attributed to the Hindu belief structure, but Crosby et al. note that evidence of *suttee* exists in other cultures well before the rise of Hinduism. The practice of suicide by fire has extended into the twentieth century with published accounts of ritualistic self-incineration dating through to the 1980's (Shkrum & Johnston, 1992). Thankfully, this practice is not common in Western societies currently. Although a spate of highly publicised self-incinerations occurred during the 1960's as political protests against the Vietnam war, in general the incidence of suicide by fire is relatively low, as evidenced by its absence in official statistical records.

Although suicide is predominantly a male adolescent act, it is often female adults who commit self-incineration. Features of the act include it is usually undertaken in the victim's residence and accelerant is often used. Due to the presence of accelerant, the extent of injuries is generally severe and there is a higher mortality rate than for accidental burns. Many victims die en route to medical assistance. Despite the rare occurrence of this act, several motivating factors have been identified. Cultural background is a prominent feature for this group of people. Self-incineration is often associated with strict fundamentalist religious beliefs that are regularly accompanied by strong ideas about guilt, punishment and the afterlife. In these cases fire is symbolic of purification, sacrifice, and punishment.

Prior thoughts of suicide are reported in approximately one third of cases, although not necessarily specifically involving fire. As with most suicides this can mean thoughts of suicide being voiced or prior attempts being enacted. Mental illness is a feature for the victim and a history of psychiatric problems in the family can often be found. In the case of adolescents, the family is technically intact but with evidence of

¹ This manuscript was prepared while the author was contracted to Charles Sturt University, Policing Academy, Goulburn, NSW.

² Correspondence may be addressed to the author by email to info@firefocus.net.

longstanding pathology. Stoddard, Pahlavan, and Cahners (1985) note that beyond religiosity, heredity factors, mental disorder and family psychopathology, for the adolescent victim self-incineration frequently occurs after the failure of care-takers to provide an appropriate response to cries for help.

People who decide to burn themselves to death have finally reached a crisis point where they feel isolated and hopeless. Bostic (1973) best summarises the unique horror of this act when he writes

Self-immolation is an act not often committed, not casually arrived at, and, most assuredly, not easily forgotten. *As an act of suicide, it is more than just an anguished cry for help – it is a seering (sic) demand to be remembered* (p. 73; my italics).

References

- Shkrum, M., & Johnston, K. (1992). Fire and suicide: a three-year study of self-immolation deaths. *Journal of Forensic Sciences*, 37(1), 208-221.
- Stoddard, F., Pahlavan, K., & Cahners, S. (1985). Suicide attempted by self-immolation during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescent Psychiatry*, 12, 251-280.

About The Author

Rebekah Doley is a psychologist specialising in the analysis of arson. She completed a major research project focusing on the criminal behaviour analysis of arson in the United Kingdom while completing her Master of Science (Investigative Psychology). She has recently undertaken PhD studies in the issue of deliberate firesetting in Australia with a view to identifying alternative strategies for better managing this crime. As a result of her work in this area she has been awarded the Queens Trust Award in 1995 and CFS/S.A.Great Training and Research Award in 1995, 1998, 1999, and 2000. The media as well as operational and investigating agencies regularly seek her opinion on various aspects of arson.

Rebekah's background is in human resource management where she has had extensive experience in the areas of recruitment, selection, training and personnel development. She completed her initial training in the area of Organisational Psychology before moving into the field of treatment and rehabilitation and undertaking a Master of Psychology (Clinical). Currently she is a lecturer in psychological aspects of arson with Charles Sturt University (Goulburn, Australia) and consults to organizations on the issue of serial arson and firefighter selection.