



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science - 2017

I12 Copycat Violence in Psychiatric Patients

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After attending this presentation, attendees will be aware of violent behavior and aggression as a copycat phenomenon among patients with psychiatric disorders. This presentation will discuss the cathartic effect and desensitization caused by recurrent exposure to violent media, whether it is fictional or reality based. This presentation will also examine the forensic issues and implications surrounding copycat behavior in mentally ill patients. Recommendations regarding psychoeducation for mental health care providers will be explored, such as assessment for exposure to violent media in evaluation of patients with mental illness.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by raising awareness regarding the influence of the copycat phenomenon in triggering violent acts and shaping aggressive behavior in patients with mental illness.

This presentation will make a detailed case discussion of a patient who expressed obsessive homicidal thoughts and had a history of multiple psychiatric admissions. During admissions to a community psychiatric hospital, he was diagnosed with major depressive disorder and schizophrenia spectrum disorder. The patient was fascinated with reality-based historical mass murderers, as well as movies and television shows portraying serial killers, such as *Dexter*. A psychological assessment gave no indication of psychopathic traits or antisocial personality disorder in this patient. The patient later committed a murder while being treated in a long-term care psychiatric hospital. The patient in this case exhibited a copycat behavior. While copycat phenomenon is more frequently studied in mass killings, the effect of violent media on single acts of violence, from petty crimes to homicides, is not well studied. It is not clear whether individuals who express an interest in copycat violence have a high rate of mental illness; however, it is possible that having impaired reasoning abilities combined with poor impulse control makes mentally ill patients more vulnerable to suggestibility and imitation of violent acts. Studies and reports warn of the copycat effect after mass killings.² It has been indicated that threats to conduct similar attacks tend to increase dramatically in the weeks following a highly publicized mass murder.³ According to one study, 57% of people expressing these threats and exhibiting copycat behavior had had a contact with psychiatric services; 25% have been diagnosed with behavioral and emotional disorders, 14% with mood disorders, and 6% with schizophrenia group diagnoses.³ This presentation will submit to the forensic community the potential significance of media violence and copycat effects on mentally ill patients and will examine whether psychiatric patients have a higher likelihood of threatening or committing copycat offenses.

Reference(s):

1. Florea M. (2013). Media violence and the cathartic effect. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 92, 349-353.
2. *The School Shooter: A threat assessment perspective*. Mary Ellen O'Toole, PhD Supervisory Special Agent Federal Bureau of Investigation.
3. Lindberg N., Sailas E., Kaltiala-Heino R. (2012). The copycat phenomenon after two Finnish school shootings: an adolescent psychiatric perspective. *BMC Psychiatry*. 12(1), 1.

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Copycat Violence, Media Violence, Obsessive Homicidal Thoughts

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