



December 1984

## Post-Traumatic Stress and Life-Destructive Behavior

Dennis L. Peck  
*University of Alabama*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Clinical and Medical Social Work Commons](#), and the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Peck, Dennis L. (1984) "Post-Traumatic Stress and Life-Destructive Behavior," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol11/iss4/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



## POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS AND LIFE-DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR\*

Dennis L. Peck, Ph.D.  
Department of Sociology  
The University of Alabama  
University, Alabama 35486

### ABSTRACT

Results of content analysis of investigative reports and suicide notes illustrating the association between traumatic stress and life-destructive behavior are reported. A breakdown of interpersonal relationships and the inability to adapt to situational arrangements over which they lack control are shown to be factors critical to understanding committers' motivations to suicide.

### INTRODUCTION

Emerging from a disturbance in the flow of person-person relationships, stress is a mental state based on one's awareness of the meaning of an environmental situation (Lazarus, 1966). A desire to minimize the effect of such disturbances prompts individuals to cope by attempting to reshape the environment thereby reducing the threat of the disturbance. Provided that failure can be rationalized and energies redirected toward alternative goals, the process leading to what Breed (1968) called a terminal failure situation is aborted. The alternative--an inability to accept failure and to cope with stress--often results in life-threatening behavior.

Employed by actors to cope with traumatic stress, suicide is increasingly recognized as a viable coping strategy (e.g., Breed, 1972; Peck and Bharadwaj, 1980; Wilson, 1981; Battin, 1982; Maris, 1982; Peck, 1983). Merton's (1938) seminal statement regarding structural

\* The author acknowledges with appreciation the special assistance of Sandra Lavender.

strain and stress illustrates that behavior considered to be ill-conceived may in fact represent a normal response; that is, deviant behavior is purposeful and meaningful for the participants. From this perspective the decision to engage in self-destructive acts represents a rationally determined act (Maris, 1981; 1982; Battin, 1982).

Clearly, failure affects one's perception of self-worth; failure also causes sufficient stress for a crisis situation to emerge. Whereas the intensity of crisis-related stress usually subsides for most persons (Seiden, 1977), for others self-destructive behavior offers a rational solution to the crisis. Suicide risk also appears to be related to the intensity and duration of stress-related events and conditions.

Low self-esteem and high expectations inhibit personal growth, well-being and social adaptation. In particular, diminished perceptions of self-worth are found to be prevalent among the least powerful members of society (e.g., Maris, 1969; Peck and Klemmack, 1980; Peck, 1980-1981; 1983)--these include the very young, young adults, and the elderly. One obstacle to personal well-being is that persons encumbered by stress perceive themselves as powerless to act as an effective force on their own behalf (Throits, et al., 1982; Ritter, 1984). Control over personal situations and the environment is, as noted by Reynolds and Faberow (1976), instrumental in the development of a healthy self-image and general view of life.

## METHOD

The data reported in this study were obtained from a sample of over 500 suicide records in a County Medical Examiner's Office. Recorded as part of an official investigation of equivocal death, the data pertain to contextual factors that constitute the social milieu of the deceased. In all instances, the case material is based on the recorded observations of acquaintances, relatives, friends, employers, or medical staff who had knowledge of the committer's

background. Suicide notes were also available, and these serve as another source of information.

Although secondary analysis of official data is limited, the use of investigative case reports, augmented by suicide notes, provides an opportunity to assess the effect of intrapersonal and interpersonal motivational factors associated with suicide. Reconstruction of situational meanings is important, and suicide notes often provide insight into the events and circumstances affecting the attitudes and beliefs of the writer. Suicide notes also provide a reasonable means for evaluating the reasons for life-threatening behavior. In the following section data are brought to bear on the hypothesized relationship between traumatic stress and suicidal behavior among a selective group of youthful committers.

## DATA AND DISCUSSION

Farberow (1968:393) suggests that interpersonal motivations predominate among members of youthful and middle-age groups, and may encourage life-threatening behavior ". . . as a means to influence, persuade, force, manipulate, stimulate, change, dominate, reinstate, etc., feelings or behavior in someone else." Such interpersonal motivation can be illustrated in the following descriptive cases of committers, all of whom experienced strain, stress and low-esteem.

### Case One

By leaping out of a dormitory window, a recently terminated, assistant junior varsity basketball coach ended his life soon after he was informed of the loss of that position. Prior to assuming the junior varsity position, the deceased played basketball for a major university located in the southeastern portion of the United States. An All-American high school player, he also earned All Conference honors for three years while playing basketball at the university level. According to a brother, the pressure of being one of the first minority players to participate in the conference had been very great. The brother also

stated that the deceased had made a decision to "join white society to get ahead, and he felt that who you know, especially if you were black, would make a difference." The emphasis placed on education by the mother was inconsistent with the deceased's academic performance, however. He failed to graduate from the university as a result of his low grades.

The deceased had a great desire to play professional basketball, but a knee injury suffered during his collegiate career resulted in his being a low draft choice. A subsequent tryout with a professional team was not successful because the injured knee required surgery. Thus, when he was offered the junior varsity basketball position, he accepted.

Hired for the junior varsity job by the same coach who recruited him to play at the university level, the deceased was again left behind when the head coach accepted a position as a professional coach. In addition to the recent departure of his benefactor and friend and the prospect of being without financial support, the deceased was upset because his white girlfriend had gone out-of-state on vacation. Having spent almost every night with the female friend during the previous five months, her departure bothered the deceased a great deal. A student, who had spoken with him a few hours before his death, quoted the deceased as stating "I feel empty, empty like a shell, and I want to die."

## Case Two

The 30-year-old son of a physician died by hanging. Holder of a Ph.D., the deceased experienced difficulty obtaining employment after having been committed to a county hospital for treatment of a nervous breakdown. Shortly after being released from the County Hospital, the deceased committed himself to a private hospital for further treatment.

Information upon which this case is built was obtained from male friends. Although the deceased did not drink or use other kinds of drugs, he was described as a very nervous person. According to a

notation in his medical records at County Hospital, "The deceased thought he was God." The text of one of several notes found at the scene stated.

There must be a way for me to return--to return to my former self. I was happy, employed and satisfied with my daily life. I had no fear, now I'm plagued with fear--the fear that I can't go on. The boredom of daily life plagues me. Is there an answer if there is is it work, a lover, life or death?

If I live, will I return to my former self? Will I again be happy and free--free to enjoy the little things, my daily life? Or will I forever be locked into my living death. A dead spirit without hope or care. Will my life continue in this way or will my spirit awaken, a new soul develop.

Questions, Questions--all without answer. Except for time--time the great healer. Dear God please help me. Give me meaning for this existence, give me life, give me sex. All this I ask of you. With only the promise that I'll continue with my life as it was--an attempt to help all people with no request for help for me. Help Me! Help me! Help me!

I guess there is no help for me. No one answers my prayers. I need a job and sit here by the phone hour after lonely hour waiting for that call, but it never comes. Rejection after rejection nothingness, years of hard work washed away by callous employers who don't answer your call--why, oh why don't they call even to say "no" so the waiting will end? Oh, God, help me.

Day after empty day with nothing to do. Why oh why do I have to suffer so? The emptiness of winter surrounding me. The loneliness of life swelling in my breast. Is there hope?

Or is the only hope death? I wish there was some other way but I doubt it it.

### Case Three

Described as a very intelligent person, a 26-year-old divorcee reacted to her failure to establish a meaningful, long-term relationship by taking her life. The deceased thought of herself as being socially ineffective, and that future encounters with men would be problematic.

Resigned to the fact that she was powerless to control these relationships, suicide represented an alternative to coping with the problems of living. The following suicide note was written to her physician.

Dear Dr. C. . .

I have been afraid, off and on for several months, that I might try to commit suicide again after 5 long years of getting cured of it . . . . I've been thinking I might try it partly because I have questioned why I was alive, anyhow, most of my life; partly because I can't seem to get along without making up turmoil for myself and any passers-by I can get in on it. Partly because I came to regard suicide as a good way out of it years ago; partly for a great bunch of reasons I don't know anything about; and now mainly because I got myself into another disastrous love affair. I haven't been able to understand much about . . . especially his feelings about his family and his feelings toward me, I've just insisted that he love me exclusively and forever, and make everything all right. Desperate of me, yes? When he made it more and more clear that he would rather patch up his domestic life than stay with me, I tried hard as I could to keep in mind that it was only reasonable, and he loved his children, and there were four of his family and only one of me but it didn't work and I got

desperate in the other direction--within a week I doggedly made love to two men I knew slightly and like mildly. It was (or they were) partly a defiance gesture but mainly a try at breaking off my dependence on . . . . Since . . . and I had decided to become "friends," I told him the first time I spent the night with someone else, and he got ferociously angry. I told him because I thought it would be easier for both of us to abolish our romantic attachment, and it certainly was. Then I figured out that not only could I not bear his contempt, I also couldn't bear much of anything at all. So I'm going to try my best to kill myself. It isn't easy to do; I've had to get somewhat drunk to really put my heart in it. I suppose I'm doing it to make . . . sorry, for something or other, I forget what, more as a way to tell him that I'm sorry and that I know how irreversible it all is, his behavior and mine. It's a kind of penance.

I don't like writing this to you. I don't like the whole idea of suicide notes. I would guess they're usually pretty wild and that the truths they ever tell have got to be pitifully partial. But, I don't like mysteries so I felt I ought to tell you what I was thinking at least some of the time, distorted as it may be, before I stop thinking altogether. . . .

Last, I want to tell you that, rigid, naive, and devious as I am, I'm sure I would have found reasons to kill myself sooner or later, with or without . . . I have been unhappy and frightened about dying for the past several days, but also determined and sometimes euphoric. The mood in Shakespeare's "Fear No More" speech fits mine exactly, except that as subject right now, I am also excited and terrified by what seems to me to be the miracle as well as the horror of death.



Thanks for being my confident and friends,  
and for being a fine man. I'm glad to be  
leaving you.

#### Case Four

Reared in an upper-middle-class environment, a 19-year-old university dropout died from an overdose of barbiturates. Three short notes were found near the corpse. In the first the deceased wrote "Last chance. If it isn't past one, tell me how your weekend was." The second note contained an equally oblique message. "Play it all the way through, that (sic) all there is to say." Another note written to a friend stated: "Matt, I've gone to . . . . If no response on phone, I'm in Hell, meet me." Finally, a tape recorded message found at the scene indicated that the deceased had planned to asphyxiate himself because he was emotionally upset for a variety of reasons, most of which were attributed to the recent death of his father.

The young man took his life approximately two months after his father's death. Described as chronically discontented, the deceased, according to a brother, had not gotten along well with his father. Then, after the father's death, the deceased experienced guilt feelings related to this unhappy relationship. According to the mother, the father had pressured the children to excel in everything, including academic study, and the deceased was subjected to ridicule from family members because he flunked out of college. Each child was taught to be a perfectionist. Less than acceptable performances prompted constant reminders that the deceased did not measure up to the level of performance demonstrated by other family members and expected by the father. When the father became ill, pressure on the son subsided. This prompted some resentment among the deceased's siblings who, in turn, directed their anger toward the deceased.

## Case Five

After serving three months in the U.S. Army, an 18-year-old male was medically discharged because of his malformed feet. Two months later his mother found him hanging in the attic of the residence they shared. Stating that she had argued with her son several hours before his death about his lack of employment, the mother did not believe, however, that this argument caused the son to become despondent.

The deceased apparently perceived himself to be a social misfit because of his deformity. He also believed that difficulty experienced in walking was responsible for his lack of success in securing a job. The family physician supported this view.

Along with a bag of marijuana, the following suicide note was found.

Mom,

Sorry I caused you so much trouble in my life time. Didn't mean to hurt you at all. As for drugs, I might as well tell you what I did. I've done grass, of which you already know about. You once asked me if I did anything else. I saw how heartbroken you were so I was afraid to tell you that I've also done Hash, acid, speed, THC and Mescaline. I sold my coin collection about a year ago, but you still have my bank account, my check for \$110.00 and my life insurance policy to get you by easily. The only thing I want you to do for me is to never tell . . . or . . . baby about me. I'm the black sheep of the family. As for the savings bonds of . . . just tell him when he's old enough that I was a friend of the family with the same last name. I don't want him to look down on me when he is older. Maybe he'll turn out to be a better person than I was. Don't feel too bad, it's all for the best.

I was just telling someone last night that I've experienced life and didn't like it, so I'd like to experience death. Just turn to . . . for help and understanding. He's a great person, I hope you two get married someday.

Just one last thing, I'd appreciate it if you would find some connection for me. I want my body to be willed to science. Maybe it can help somebody live. Since I'm a legal adult I have this right. Whatever the doctors need is theirs for the taking. Now I can be with gramma . . . again. She's a great person I've always loved her. Give my albums to . . . also give my television and table to . . . Give my army shirts and jacket to . . . You can give the rest of the stuff to Goodwill. Sorry about all this trouble.

You had nothing to do with the reasons for this. I'll see you all again someday.

Love,

Paul

P.S. Please do all I asked. My body is in the attic. I've come to the end of my rope. I enjoy hanging around.

"Paul"

### Case Six

Hanging by a rope ended the life of a male two weeks before his twentieth birthday. Aspiring to be a magician, the deceased tried to support himself as a housepainter. Unfortunately, some clients paid for this service with checks written on accounts with insufficient funds and as a result, the deceased experienced financial problems which caused him to be despondent. The following note was found in a wallet.

I am very sorry--but the future holds for me only more trouble--I've tried my damnest to make good--but, even working legally--people try and try to rip me off. I do not wish to hurt anyone. . . I love you all. I think it's better this way. Don't weep for me--the tears will be wasted. . . .

### Case Seven

After six unsuccessful attempts to end her life, a 34-year-old woman committed suicide after checking into a luxury motel one day before she was scheduled to appear at a divorce hearing. Even though the deceased had initiated the divorce action, she was distraught over the possibility that custody of two children would go to the husband. At the time of death the deceased was employed by a nursing home, but prior occupational activities included work as an advertising salesperson and the presidency of a corporation she had created.

Similar to the previous suicide attempts, the deceased slashed her wrists and took an overdose of aspirin and sleeping tablets. A suicide note addressed to one of her children stated:

Dear Stacy,

Try to understand Mommy did her best to have you with me again. But I wasted too many years before I began doing all the right things.

Love, please believe I did love and want you, but I've used up all my strength fighting. I wouldn't have had to go through so much and fight so hard if I hadn't been so foolish in the beginning.

Oh, Stacey, I love you!

Mommy

Case Eight

Unable to cope with the fact that he and his male lover were drifting apart after an intense six-month relationship, a 19-year-old took an overdose of barbiturates. On the previous night the deceased and his former boyfriend had gone out to drink. During that evening it was decided that they terminate the relationship. This caused the deceased to become upset and he began drinking. The autopsy report indicated that any of the several drugs identified in the blood was at a level sufficient to be fatal when combined with the amount of alcohol consumed. This particular death might have been considered an accident except that the following note was found at the scene of death.

Dearest Love,

I just thought I'd write you a farewell letter. I feel it would be nice to tell you things that you might not want to hear and also so I wouldn't waste your time an (sic) lengthen this hard task.

I love you deeply and hate to lose you, but I won't persist you anymore, seeing how you don't think I can offer you what you want-- Sorry--but a little longer time might have helped for us it could have been a balanced relationship.

I love you from the bottom of my heart that hit the deepest part of me--don't forget it please--but that's life. I'm taking a quick way out it was one of the two I'm taking the quickest way out. I don't care if you say I'm coping out either way it would be and I don't expect for this letter to change your mind it can't if you wanted to do anything about it, it would just screw you more so-- So don't let it happen--Just forget we ever had anything--I was too skitsofrenic (sic) for you--

Well that's enough don't worry there won't be anyone I'm imposing on a soul. I'm leaving too quick and its almost a free ticket and nobody but myself will be paying for that ride the final one, one way only.

Take care my last love for there will never be another one in my life believe me I mean what I say.

Hope you (sic) be happy in the future I know I will not be here for long it's a matter of a couple of hours before I depart.

Bye Bye my love,

Greg and Mike  
could have been.  
Live well.

#### Cases Nine and Ten

Married only six months a 23-year-old female shot herself in the head. The young widower told investigators that although the deceased was a nervous person who easily became depressed, she never complained, nor did she give any indication that she was contemplating suicide. However, she was concerned about their inability to pay for needed automobile repairs and the fact that money was not available for a down-payment on a house of their own. Another contributing factor to their financial plight was the psychiatric care required for the deceased's chronic anxiety depression and the chiropractic treatment for numbness in her left side.

The deceased was invited to accompany her husband on a hunting trip. While thought to be in good spirits, she refused to go along. Seven hours later the husband returned to find his wife dead and two short notes in their bedroom.

Mom & Dad,

Please forgive me. I'm sorry.

I am sorry for everything, Every time I try to talk things out I make matters worse. I have to end it. Please forgive me. God knows I love you but somehow it comes out all wrong. Maybe after I'm gone your bad luck will go away. I'm sorry.

Five days later after his wife's death, the 24-year-old widower was found lying over the grave of his wife, a bullet wound in the head. A picture of his wife along with the following note were found at the scene.

Dad,

I'm sorry for this but I have to. Karen was and will be my life. There is nothing without her. I know this will cause pain again, but she is calling me. Dad I love her so much and I love you but I can't go on. I pray there is life after death and we will be together, we have to be. I know I'm weak but if you could have loved her as I did and do you would know. If I hadn't worked those nights or we had gone more places I don't think this would have happened. She did it for me and now I do it for her. Just turn on the tape player and the tape will say what I'm trying to. I'm sorry Dad, really I am, but I must. I love you and under the rug of the front door are the keys.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between traumatic stress and life-destructive behavior. Based on the information reported, some evidence to support the hypothesized relationship is found: stress, emerging from failure is related to suicidal behavior. Ineffectual in controlling the actions of others or the outcome of events, these committers recognized

their inability to influence future outcomes as well. The manner in which individuals assess their well-being, then, seems crucial to understanding motivations to engage in life-destructive behavior.

Suicidal behavior can be attributed in part to the actor's stress-related reaction to negative perceptions of self-worth, and in part to an inability to act upon situations causing traumatic stress. Moreover, the data suggest that life-destructive behavior is related to strain and stress emerging from what the general population experience in their everyday living patterns. Circumstances affecting the mental state of committers include the breakdown of intimate relationships and economic problems. Committers opt for what seems to them a reasonable alternative route to a painful situation.

Motivations to suicide include a breakdown of intimate relationships and the inability to accept situational arrangements dictated by others. One obstacle to social and psychological well-being among this sample of committers was the recognition that they were powerless to act as an effective force on behalf of their own best interests. Obstacles to personal well-being appear to contribute to the decision to suicide; the taking of one's own life may be the final effort to control an outcome.

The finding that people view themselves as insignificant seems worthy of attention. A public policy directed towards meeting the needs of individuals who are bereaved and experience stress sufficient to induce a life-and-death crisis would seem consequential for whole communities. Whereas individual initiative is involved, life-destructive behavior is the result of an interface between the individual and society. Both have needs which can be fulfilled by assisting individuals to develop positive self-concepts that are both consistent with acceptable lifestyles and also correspond to realistic levels of expectation. Perhaps responsible persons can demonstrate their concern by creating realistic public policies oriented toward assisting people to deal with bereavement and in responding to traumatic stress



related crises in ways other than by acts of self-destruction.

#### REFERENCES

- Battin, Margaret Pabst  
1982 Ethical Issues in Suicide. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Breed, Warren  
1968 "The suicide process." Pp. 286-291 in Norman L. Farberow (ed.) Fourth International Conference for Suicide Prevention. Los Angeles: Delmar Publishing Co.  
  
1972 "Five components of a basic suicide syndrome." Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior 2:3-18.
- Davis, Robert  
1980 "Suicide among young blacks: Trends and perspectives." Phylon 41:223-229.
- Farberow, Norman L.  
1968 "Suicide: Psychological aspects." Pp. 390-396 in D.L. Sills (ed.) International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. New York: The MacMillan Company and The Free Press.
- Lazarus, R.S.  
1966 Psychological Stress. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Maris, Ronald W.  
1969 Social Forces in Urban Suicide. Homewood, Illinois: Dorsey.  
  
1971 "Deviance as therapy: The paradox of the self-destructive female." Journal of Health and Social Behavior 12:113-124.

- Maris, Ronald W.  
 1981 Pathways to Suicide: A Survey of Self-Destructive Behaviors. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- 1982 "Rational suicide: An impoverished self-transformation." Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior 12:4-16.
- Merton, Robert K.  
 1938 "Social structure and anomie." American Sociological Review 3:672-682.
- Peck, Dennis L.  
 1980-81 "Towards a theory of suicide: The case for modern fatalism." Omega: Journal of Death and Dying 11,1:1-14.
- 1983 "The last moments of life: Learning to cope." Deviant Behavior 4:313-332.
- Peck, Dennis L. with David L. Klemmack  
 1980 "A Comparison of socialpsychological views among youthful and aged persons: an empirical assessment of marginally differentiated attitude measures." Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare 7:842-856.
- Peck, Dennis L. and Lakshmi I. Bharadwaj  
 1980 Personal stress and fatalism as factors in college suicide." Social Science 55:19-24.
- Reynolds, David K. and Norman L. Farberow  
 1976 Suicide: Inside and Out. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ritter, Christian  
 1984 "Occupational stress and depression among Vietnam veterans." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-west Sociological Society.

Seiden, Richard H.

1977 "Suicide prevention: A public health policy approach." *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 8:267-276

Throits, Peggy A.

1982 "Conceptual, methodological, and theoretical problems in studying social support as a buffer against life stress." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 23:145-159.

Wilson, Michele

1981 "Suicidal behavior: Toward an explanation of differences in female and male rates." *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 11:131-140.