

PARENTAL ALIENATION AND SUICIDE IN MEN

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Parental alienation is defined as a mental state in which a child, usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce, allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification (Lorandos et al. 2013, von Boch-Galhau 2013). Parental alienation is anomalous, maladaptive behavior (refusal to have a relationship with a loving parent) that is driven by an abnormal emotional condition (the false belief that the rejected parent is evil, dangerous, or unworthy of love). The most common cause of parental alienation is indoctrination of the child by the alienating parent to dislike or be afraid of the target parent. The concept of parental alienation has been recognized by mental health professionals for many decades.

Suicide rates in men in Western countries are very high (Sher 2015, World Health Organization 2015). For example, age-standardized suicide rates among men in the United States, Canada, Croatia and Hungary are 19.4, 14.9, 19.8, and 32.4 per 100,000 population/year, respectively (World Health Organization 2015). It is interesting to speculate that parental alienation may contribute to suicidality in adult men who were victims of parental alienation as children or in men who are alienated from their children.

Studies suggest that parental alienation is associated with long-term psychological damage (Baker 2005, Lorandos et al. 2013, von Boch-Galhau 2013, Bernet et al. 2015). For example, a recent study showed that reports of childhood exposure to alienating behaviors were statistically significantly associated with higher scores on most of the Symptom Checklist-90-Revised (SCL-90-R) scales (Bernet et al. 2015). Moreover, the degree of exposure to alienating behaviors was positively associated with higher scores on the SCL-90-R. The SCL-90-R assesses symptoms of psychopathology and provides global distress indices. Adults who had experienced parental alienation as children frequently suffer from depression and may have problems with alcohol and drugs (Baker 2005, Lorandos et al. 2013, von Boch-Galhau 2013, Bernet et al. 2015). Mood and substance use disorders are associated with suicidal behavior (Sher et al. 2001, Maris 2002).

The predominant feelings among alienated parents are helplessness, powerlessness, and growing despair (von Boch-Galhau 2013). Fathers who have lost some

or all contact with their children for months or even years following separation or divorce are sometimes depressed and in a severe suicidal crisis since the loss of contact or restriction of the relationship between the children and the father is a very upsetting and painful experience for both the children and the father (von Boch-Galhau 2013). This may contribute to suicide in men.

Possibly, a decrease in the number and intensity of parental alienation cases may reduce suicidality in men. It is quite difficult to reduce the number and intensity of such cases. The alienating parent's task is easy. The playing field is not level. It is prejudiced in favor of the alienating parent (Bone 2012). We must simply recognize this if it is to be overcome. Legal interventions may help. Dr. Ludwig F. Lowenstein, one of Britain's most quoted authorities on psychology in education wrote: "The threat of punishment for the alienator must be supported by punishment, including removing the child from mother's care to a neutral place or to the alienated parent, and to use incarceration when necessary. Failure to carry out this distasteful, but necessary, action against the obdurate party would constitute a mockery of the judicial system. It is my experience as an expert witness to the Courts as a forensic, clinical psychologist, that most alienating parents, whether mothers or fathers, will obey a court order if punishment is threatened for failure to adhere to the ruling" (Lowenstein 1999). Education of legal and mental health professionals and the general public may also help.

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References

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