

# PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY: NEED OF THE HOUR

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## Abstract

*In recent past, the suicidal cases have been increasing day by day which require instant need of Forensic Psychologist to lead for important clues in the ongoing investigation. Suicide is “an unexpected way of death” where the willingness to die originates within the person due to the presence of known or unknown causes to end one’s life. Psychological Autopsy is a useful tool in gathering data to better understand suicidal behaviour in the incidents of suspicious death or suicides. It is an attempt to reconstruct a person’s psychological state prior to his death. It may be valuable in cases where there is some doubt as to whether the death was accidental, self inflicted or malicious, and if the deceased played an active role in his/her own demise. Psychological autopsy has become an essential part for evaluation of manner of death in difficult forensic cases.*

**Key Words:** Suicide, Forensic Psychologist, Psychological Autopsy

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## INTRODUCTION

Forensic science plays a very significant role in scientific investigation of evidences in the criminal justice delivery system. It provides accurate, objective, fair, transparent and scientifically proved information to law enforcement agencies. In the present world the cases of suicide and ambiguous death cases around us are increasing rapidly. If the incidents of suspicious death occur it is necessary to assess the mental state of a deceased on the basis of their personality, mental process and especially thought process in the light of the circumstances of the deceased then it may assist the investigation process and sometimes it is referred to as ‘equivocal death’.

Basically, the Equivocal deaths are in which the cause/manner of death is ambiguous whether the death was caused by accident, suicide, homicide or other natural cause. These are the enquiries that are open to interpretation. The case may present as either a homicide or suicide depending upon the circumstances. The facts are purposefully vague or misleading and the death is suspicious or questionable based upon what is presented to the authorities. Equivocal death analysis is an investigation process that is aid in determining the manner of death by existing forensic evidence and the behavioural and psychological history of the deceased.

In a suspicious suicide case, the medical officer does not have sufficient information to rule out the cause/manner of death. In this type of cases, **Psychological Autopsy** is used in which an attempt to reconstruct a person’s psychological state prior to death. The Psychological Autopsy is useful various cases in which cause of death is in doubt as to whether the death was accidental, self-inflicted and to know whether deceased played an active role in his/her own death. The Psychological Autopsy has utility in a variety of situations like assisting medical examiners and the criminal investigation agencies to draw a conclusion on the suspicious deaths issue.

Psychological autopsy is a retrospective analysis. It focuses on the psychological aspects of occurrence of death. Its goal is to understand the circumstances as the state of mind of the victim of his act. This includes a reconstruction of lifestyle behaviours and events experienced by the individual. The aim of the psychological autopsy is to collect as much information about the circumstances of the death and to update the reasons for suicide which eventually help reveal risk factors.

The primary objective of conducting psychological autopsy is to determine why the people die as the result of a suicide. In other cases, the psychological autopsy can be a useful tool in gathering data for the purposes of suicide prevention or to better understand suicidal behaviour.

The term “psychological autopsy” is a psychological profile to determine the mental state of someone who is not available. The psychological profile of such type of cases can be conducted on the information collected from the school, colleges, friends, relatives and other related persons to whom the person had contacted before his/her death.

The Psychological Autopsy is the method has also been used in a forensic context in both criminal and civil courts. In criminal cases, the Psychological Autopsy may be used to establish whether a deceased was committed suicide, or whether the death should be regarded as a homicide. In civil cases, the Psychological Autopsy has been used to help determine whether benefits are owed to the deceased’s beneficiaries these are pecuniary cases which involve life insurance payments, because many policies hold that a suicide precludes benefits.

#### **Goals of conducting Psychological Autopsy:**

The investigator makes great efforts to obtain an objective analysis of factors that increased and decreased the decedent’s risk of suicide. An in-depth understanding about the decedent’s personality, behaviour patterns, and possible motives for suicide is the major goal in Psychological Autopsy. The following are some of the key goals of the Psychological Autopsy:

- Identify behaviour patterns like reactions to stress, adaptability, changes in habits or routine
- Establish whether or not the deceased was a likely candidate for suicide.
- Identify possible causes
- Presence or absence of motives
- Determine suicide risk factors—both mitigating and aggravating
- Perform a post-mortem suicide risk assessment
- Presence or absence of suicidal intent
- Establishing presence or absence of mental illness

#### **Methodology**

The method involves collecting and analyzing all relevant information on the deceased. All applicable records are reviewed, including medical records, psychiatric records, police records, and autopsy findings. An inspection of the place of occurrence and photographs is necessary. A detailed analysis of deceased writings in the form of diaries, journals, e-mails, and internet chats, WhatsApp chats, or other social networking groups chats is necessary to analyse.

To reviewing the already available records, conducting structured interviews with family members, relatives, and/or friends is also playing the vital role. Thus, Psychological Autopsy creates data from different sources and records. The Psychological Autopsy is conducted in a comprehensive manner, and it takes anywhere from 20–50 hours or longer to complete. The main principle of Psychological Autopsy is that the greater the amount of relevant data analyzed, the more accurate the investigator’s conclusions are likely to be. IN some of the cases, deceased may have displayed unique, individualized and permanent behaviours suggestive of increased or decreased suicide risk that will be known only to close social contacts or treating mental health professionals.

Forensic Psychologist requires the following authenticated information to conduct the psychological autopsy.

- Interview with the family members, suspects, witnesses & their statements
- FIR and Investigation report
- Crime Scene Investigation report
- Medico-Legal Opinion (Post mortem report)
- Crime Scene Visit
- Other Forensic inputs available

During process of Psychological Autopsy main Main elements is explained further as stated below.

- Physical Reactions: Real life incidents, Noticeable behavioral changes, Behavior prior to death etc
- Physiological Changes: Medical History, Alcohol Habits and Drug abuse
- Psychological Changes: Fear of failure, arrest, apprehension, Psychological History like Illusion, Hallucination, Schizophrenic and Motive Assessment
- Verbal Revelations: Pre-suicidal revelation, Discussions, Suicide Note, SMS and Whatsapp messages etc
- Circumstances: Choice of weapon, Time and Place of Incident, Lethality and Familiarity with the mode of killing

- Other inputs: Statistical, Forensic, Crime Scene Reports and any other details that suggests possible suicide

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical and Practical consideration is the major and sensitive issue as it deals with emotional demands and disturbances on victim's acquaintances and usually required while directing psychological autopsy. Investigators performing a Psychological Autopsy for forensic legal purposes will likely be supplied with relevant phone numbers and addresses of potential interviewees. Attorneys will often have previously informed the interviewees that an investigator will be contacting them. Investigators seeking interviews for research purposes may consider sending a letter followed by a phone call, or vice versa. The interviewees are to be fully informed. Consent of victim acquaintances and they also have the right to refuse it. For research purposes, a 2 to 6 month interval between the suicide and the interview is recommended. The integrity of the deceased should be respected.

### **Limitations of conducting Psychological Autopsy**

Psychological autopsy is not the solution for all death investigations but throws convincing light on the most probable manner of death. Information gathered for psychological autopsy is quite personal so confidentiality is to be maintained strictly. The accuracy of the psychological autopsy depends on the data collected from various sources and its veracity so sources and their reliability is very important. These are the following limitations for conducting Psychological Autopsy:

- A relatively unstructured clinical technique in which a mental health professional attempts to discern the mental state of a deceased person at some previous time
- No standardized techniques.
- Issues of content validity and reliability.
- Different institutions / jurisdictions have different approaches to psychological autopsy.
- Admissibility of evidence

### **Legal Status of Psychological Autopsy in India**

The psychological autopsy satisfies the Daubert standard of admissibility in court. In India, a court in Kerala had directed the investigating authorities to conduct the psychological autopsy where the mode of death was ambiguous. (Kasarkode, Kasi QM Abdulla) This exciting technology gives the judge and jury new scientifically valid evidence to help them arrive at their decision. Psychological Autopsy is new to Indian Forensics and Judiciary; therefore, it lacks judicial precedence. This can be used as investigative tool and as corroborative evidence along with other findings. However, subject to judicial scrutiny, under section 293 Cr.PC, it may be admissible as evidence in the court of law. In Sunanda Pushkar case, Burari Mass suicide case as well as Sushant Singh Rajput case the findings of Psychological Autopsy were also utilized.

### **Conclusion:**

The Psychological Autopsy has become an essential part of the evaluation of manner of death in difficult forensic cases. It is a clinical and a research tool that is likely to clarify the circumstances of a death in cases of suicide, of homicide or suspicious death. Through careful assessment of crime scene investigation, autopsy findings, the decedent's psychological background, presence or absence of risk factors for suicide, and other information can provide significant insight into the decedent's state of mind at the time of death. It is a very important tool for assessing the causes and precipitants of suicide. Many research studies conducted in India and it was found that Psychological Autopsy can be of great help in the investigation of equivocal death. In Indian cases where the manner of Death was not clear Psychological Autopsy was in a position to give a better view about the mental status of the victim just before the incident. More and more studies in this field are required with a larger sample size for evaluation of suicides.

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