

## From paranoid fear to completed homicide

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### Disclosure

The author reports no financial relationship with any company whose products are mentioned in this article or with manufacturers of competing products.

**A** crescendo of paranoid fear sharply increases the likelihood that a person will kill his (her) misperceived persecutor. Persecutory delusions are more likely to lead to homicide than any other psychiatric symptom.<sup>1</sup> If people define a delusional situation as real, the situation is real in its consequences.

Based on my experience performing more than 100 insanity evaluations of paranoid persons charged with murder, I have identified 4 paranoid motives for homicide.

**Self-defense.** The most common paranoid motive for murder is the misperceived need to defend one's self.

*A steel worker believed that there was a conspiracy to kill him. His wife insisted that he go to a hospital emergency room for an evaluation. He then concluded that his wife was in on the conspiracy and stabbed her to death.*

**Defense of one's manhood.** Homosexual panic occurs in men who think of themselves as heterosexual.

*A man with paranoid schizophrenia developed a delusion that his former high school football coach was having the entire team rape him at night. He shot the coach 6 times in front of 22 witnesses.*

**Defense of one's children.** A parent may kill to save her (his) children's souls.

*A deeply religious woman developed persecutory delusions that her 9-year-old son and 3-year-old daughter were going to be kidnapped and forced to make child pornography. To save her children's souls, she stabbed her children more than 100 times.*

**Defense of the world.** Homicide may be seen as a way to protect all humankind.

*A woman developed a delusion that her father was Satan and would kill her. She believed that if she could kill her father (Satan) and his family she would save herself and bring about world peace. After killing her father, she thrust the sharp end of a tire iron into her grandmother's umbilicus and vagina because those body parts were involved in "birthing Satan."*

### Questioning to determine risk

I have found that, when evaluating a paranoid, delusional person for potential violence, it is better to present that person with a hypothetical question about encountering his perceived persecutor than with a generic question about homicidality.<sup>2</sup> For example, a delusional person who reports that he was afraid of being killed by the Mafia could be asked, "If you were walking down an alley and encountered a man dressed like a Mafia hit man with a bulge in his jacket, what would you do?" One interviewee might reply, "The Mafia has so much power there is nothing I could do." Another might answer, "As soon as I got close enough I would blow his head off with my .357 Magnum." Although both people would be reporting honestly that they have no homicidal ideas, the latter has a much lower threshold for killing in misperceived self-defense.

### Summing up

Persecutory delusions are more likely than any other psychiatric symptom to lead a psychotic person to commit homicide. The killing might be motivated by misperceived self-defense, defense of one's manhood, defense of one's children, or defense of the world.

### References

1. Wessely S, Buchanan A, Reed A, et al. Acting on delusions. I. Prevalence. *Br J Psychiatry*. 1993;163:69-76.
2. Resnick PJ. My favorite tips for detecting malingering and violence risk. *Psychiatr Clin North Am*. 2007;30(2):227-232.