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Help Stop the Choking Game

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UTILIZING THE PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY IN ASPHYXIAL DEATH INVESTIGATION

Developed By

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By way of introduction my name is Michael Bleak. I am a Detective with the Cedar City Police Department in the State of Utah, United States of America. I also work as a Scene Investigator with the State of Utah Office of the Medical Examiner. I have been employed in the field of Public Safety for 21 years. The last 10 years have been dedicated to the investigation of death and other serious crimes against persons.

Manner vs. Cause of Death:

Manner can be divided into 5 categories: Homicide; Suicide; Accidental; Natural; and Undetermined. **Cause of death has indeterminate possibilities.** As many methods as we as humans have discovered to take another life or our own. The forensic autopsy, as performed by a qualified forensic pathologist, is the standard way to determine the cause of death in an individual. However the Manner of Death can be much more difficult as well as controversial to determine. **The Cause of Death manifests itself during the forensic examination of the decedent most of the time. However, a suicidal strangulation by fixed ligature will look identical to an accidental ligature death caused by The Choking Game.**

The Psychological Autopsy:

The Psychological Autopsy is the method to answer the impossible question of what the decedent was thinking at the time of their death. Whether the death is homicidal, suicidal, accidental, or of natural causes it is important to determine. Although this rarely occurs there is also an undetermined manner of death classification. **A detailed Psychological Autopsy will likely solidify the determination in the manner of death.** Let me introduce you to the case that solidified my involvement in the investigation of Choking Game related deaths.

Shawn M., age 14, died on July 28, 2009 in his mother and step father's home. I was called to investigate. Shawn had been transported by ambulance to the local medical center prior to my arrival at the scene. Shawn was then air lifted to a pediatric medical center where he subsequently died. There was a pull up bar hanging in the hallway outside of Shawn's bedroom with an RCA television cable attached. Shawn was found suspended from the cable with his knees on the floor. Shawn was resuscitated at the scene and subsequently air lifted to Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City. His mother accompanied him on the transport.

I was contacted the next day by the Office of the Medical Examiner and informed that Shawn had passed away. I was also advised that it had been ruled that Shawn had passed of a suicide by ligature strangulation. At this time my case was essentially closed. I did not give another thought to this case until March of 2012.

In October 2011, I learned the value of the psychological autopsy in these types of death investigations. I learned of the Choking Game through the investigation of two deaths in my local area where the criteria for ruling the manner of death as suicide was not present. In March of 2012, I was contacted by the State of Utah Office of the Medical Examiner in regards to Shawn M.'s case. I was advised that his mother had contacted their office and requested the investigation into his death be reexamined.

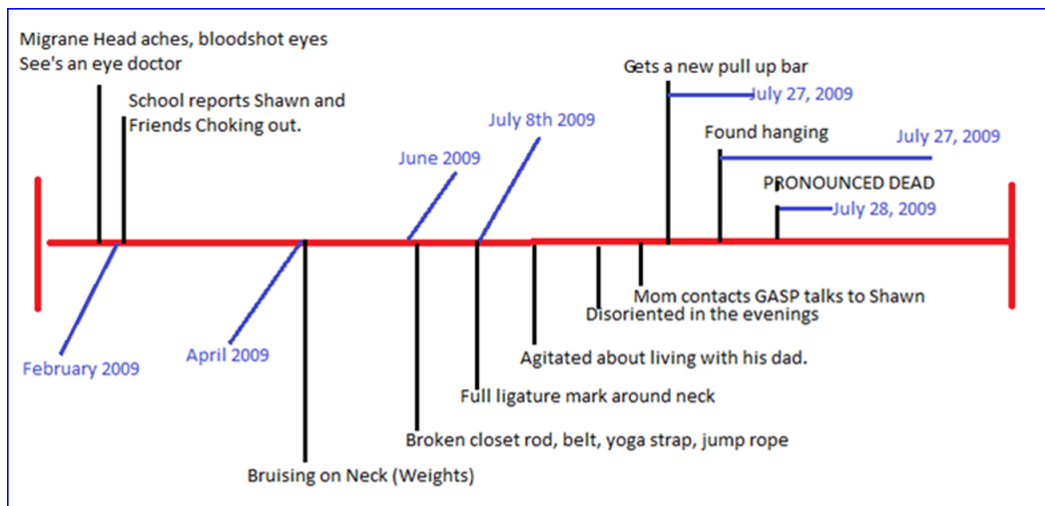
I quickly realized that I had done a haphazard investigation at best. Part of the reason for this was that Shawn's mother was not available at the initial point of investigation. Another is the fact that the Office of the Medical Examiner pronounced the death a suicide within 24 hours. There was never a cognitive interview carried out with Shawn's mother or anyone else that was close with him at the time of death.

Choking Game Warning Signs:

I want to introduce some of the common physiological signs that go along with participation in the choking game: bloodshot eyes; severe headaches; irritability after time alone, petichiae; and disorientation after spending time alone. Some of the physical items that may accompany the scene of someone participating in the choking game might include: ropes, scarves, or other items located tied or affixed to bedroom furniture; conciliatory clothing; red marks or bruising on the neck; Items used as a ligatures out of place such as belts, yoga traps, jump rope, or TV wires

Timeline from the Psychological Autopsy determining Accidental Death due to Choking Game:

As I completed a cognitive interview with Shawn's mother, the following information surfaced:



An important aspect in the Psychological Autopsy is to conduct all of the initial interviews using a cognitive method. There should not be any evidence or information introduced by the investigator to the subject of the investigation. This makes for a more detailed and complete view of the decedent from the perspective of the witness or family member. Prior to conducting this interview I did not share any of the common signs or symptoms with Shawn's mother. I did not suggest any of the evidence or behavior that she reported Shawn as taking part in prior to this interview.

As a result of the follow up investigation, Shawn's death was changed from a suicide to an accidental death by the Office of the Medical Examiner. Little did I know at the time that this was a mountain of a task.

I believe that the responsibility of investigating the death of another human being is a sacred responsibility. The words of Voltaire epitomized this sacred duty when he said, *"To the living we owe respect, but to the dead we owe only the truth."*

To the victims of the choking game we owe an oath as parents, educators, investigators, medical professionals, and humanity that we strive to better understand this activity so that we may combat this activity.

**Your kids are not immune. Some kids only tried this once or twice.
They didn't know they were gambling with their lives.**

Learn how we can help your community at www.erikscause.org