

Perpetrators and Victims: Understanding and Treating Maternal Filicide Offenders

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Specific Forms of Homicide Associated with Psychosis

■ Filicide

- It is greatest within the first year.
- Among infants in the first week of life, mothers are almost always the ones who committed the filicide (Kunz & Bahr, 1996).

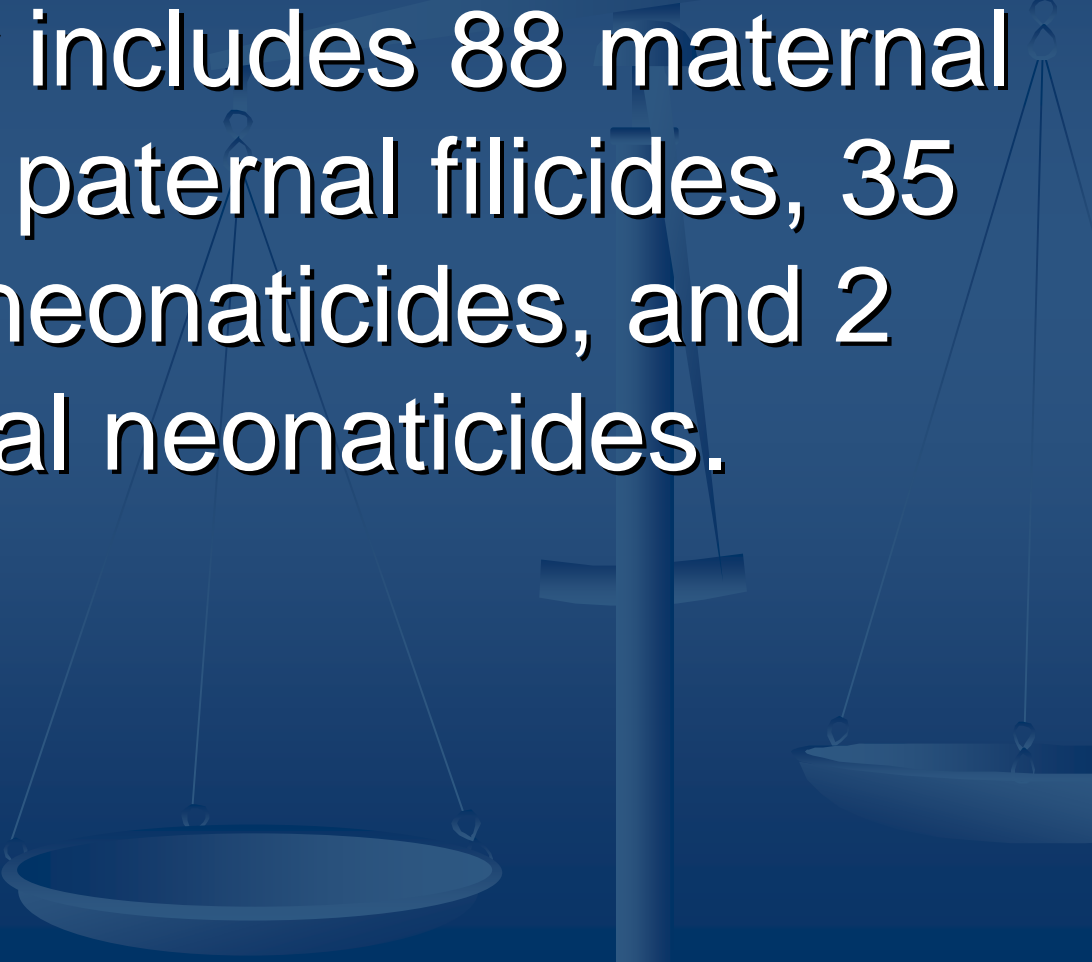
■ Types of Filicide

- Neonaticide
- Infanticide
- Filicide

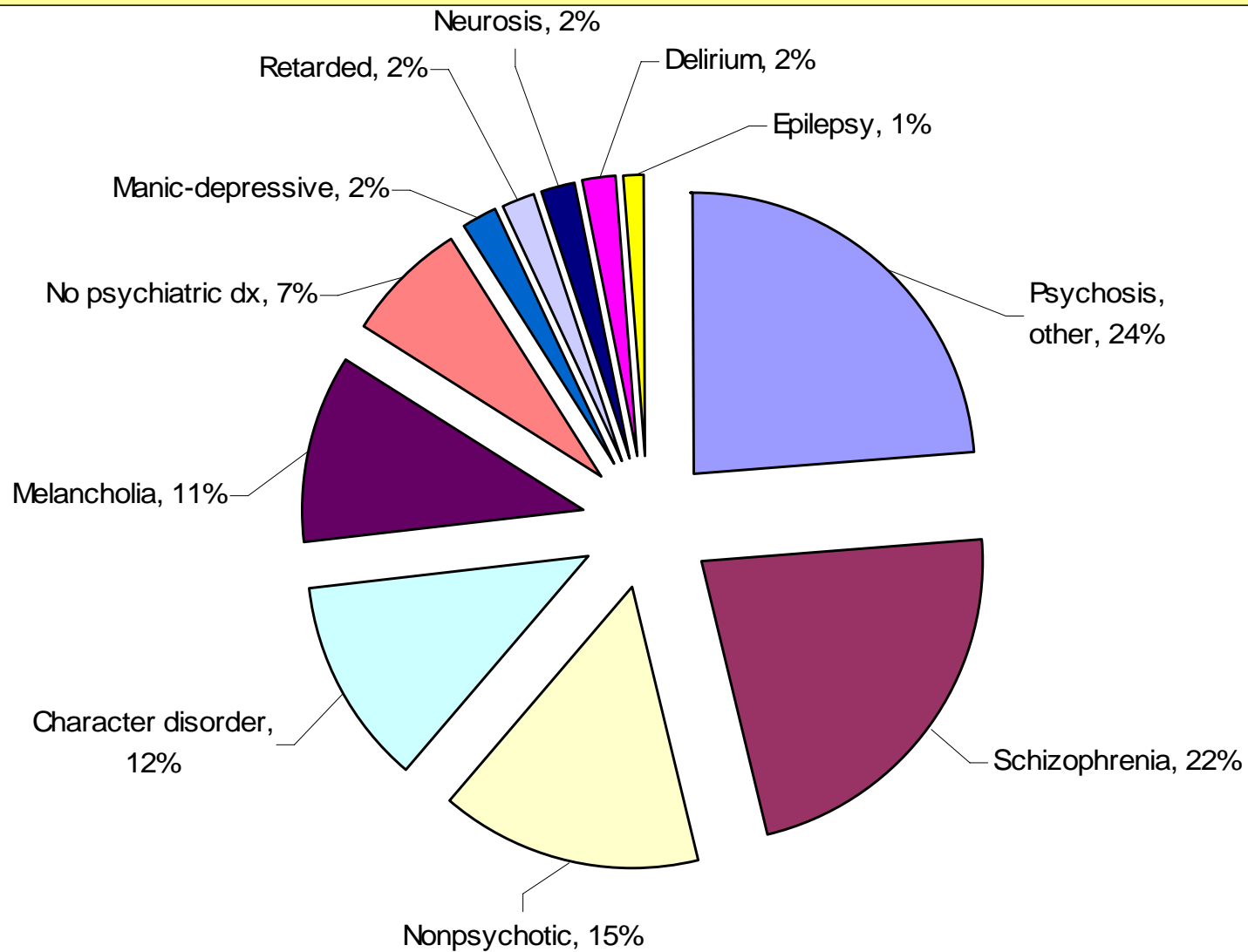
Filicide

- The most dangerous period for the victim is the first six months of life. This is the time of maternal post-partum psychoses and depressions.
- Men, as compared to women, who kill their children are more likely to kill older children, are more likely to be unemployed, are more likely to be facing separation from their spouse, and are more likely to abuse alcohol or drugs.

Resnick's (1969) seminal study on child-murder includes 88 maternal filicides, 43 paternal filicides, 35 maternal neonaticides, and 2 paternal neonaticides.



Psychiatric diagnoses were quite variable:



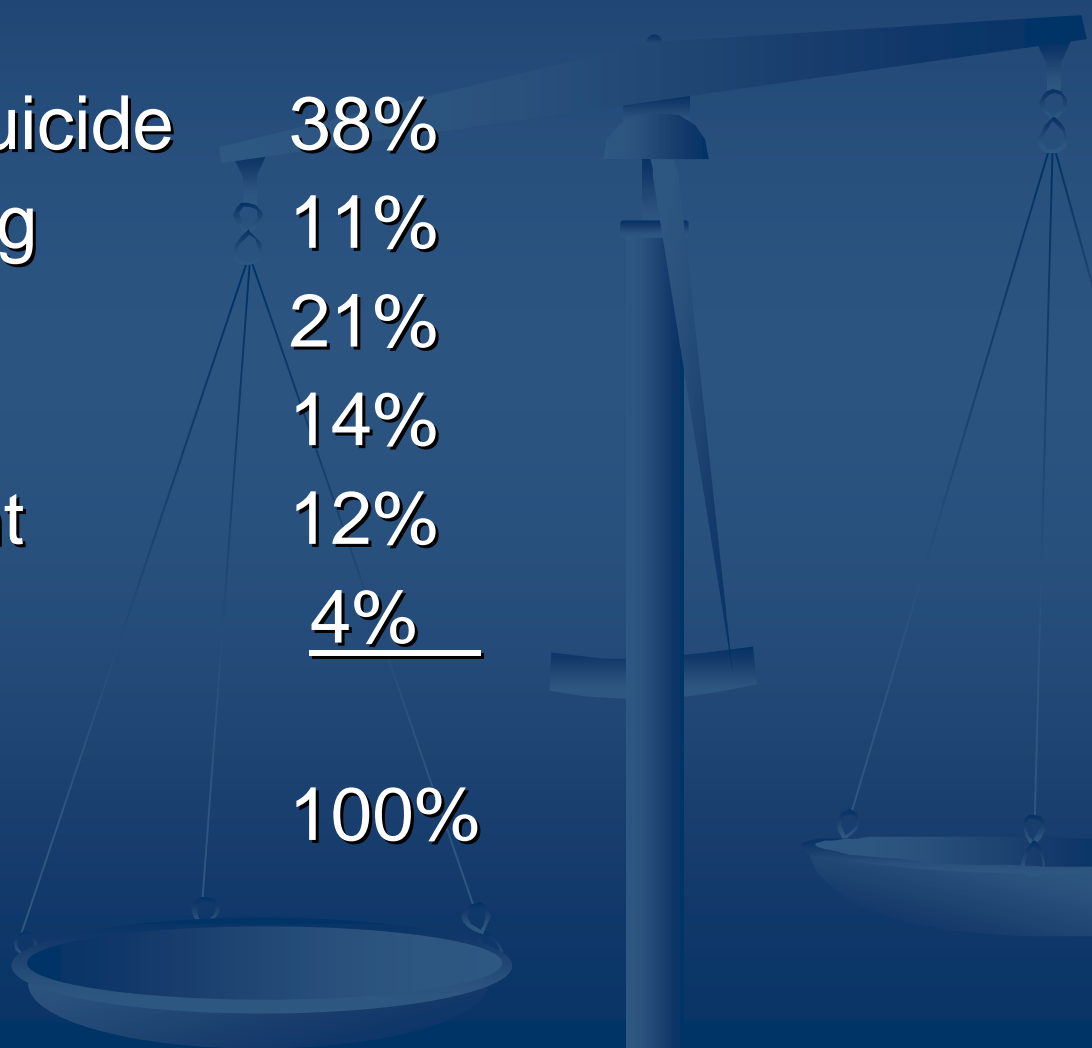
Psychosis and/or Depression in Filicide Offenders

- Only a few of the women in the neonaticide group were psychotic, but psychosis was evident in two-thirds of the maternal filicide group.
- Depression was found in 71% of the maternal filicide groups and in only 3 of the neonaticide cases.
- Suicide attempts accompanied more than one-third of the filicides, but none occurred among neonaticide cases.

Classification of Filicide by Apparent Motive

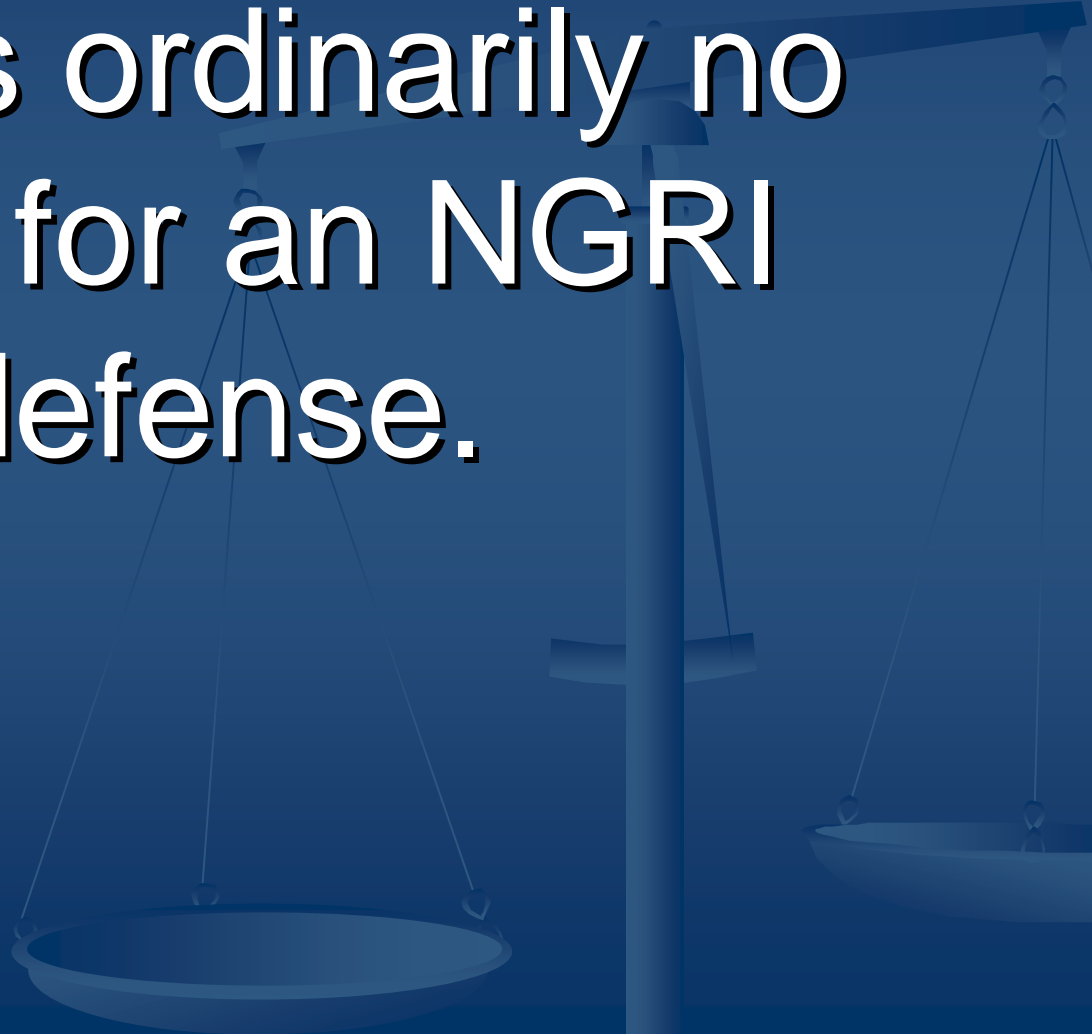
“Altruistic”

Associated with suicide	38%
To relieve suffering	11%
Acutely psychotic	21%
Unwanted child	14%
Fatal maltreatment	12%
Spouse revenge	<u>4%</u>
Total (N=131)	100%

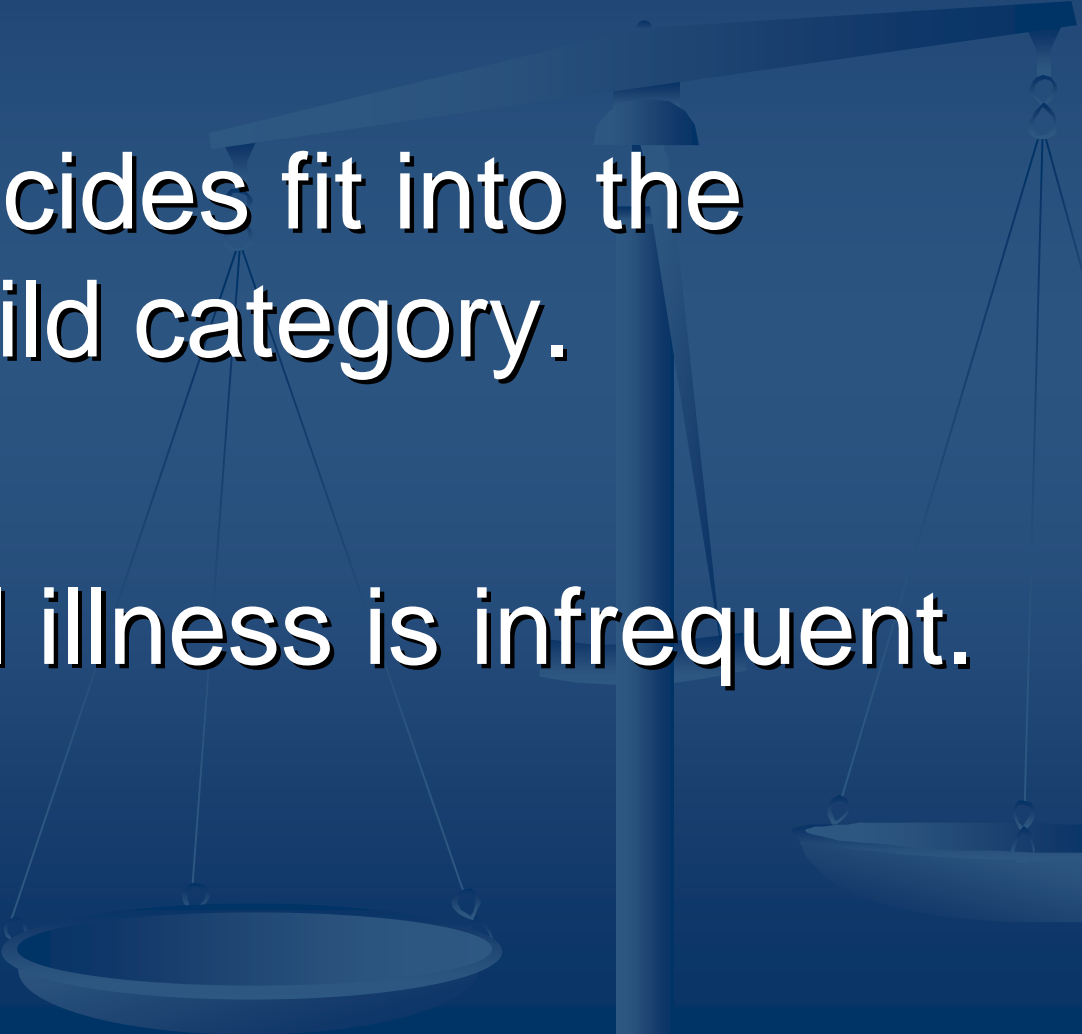


Unwanted child filicide:

There is ordinarily no basis for an NGRI defense.



Neonaticide:

- Most neonaticides fit into the unwanted child category.
 - Major mental illness is infrequent.
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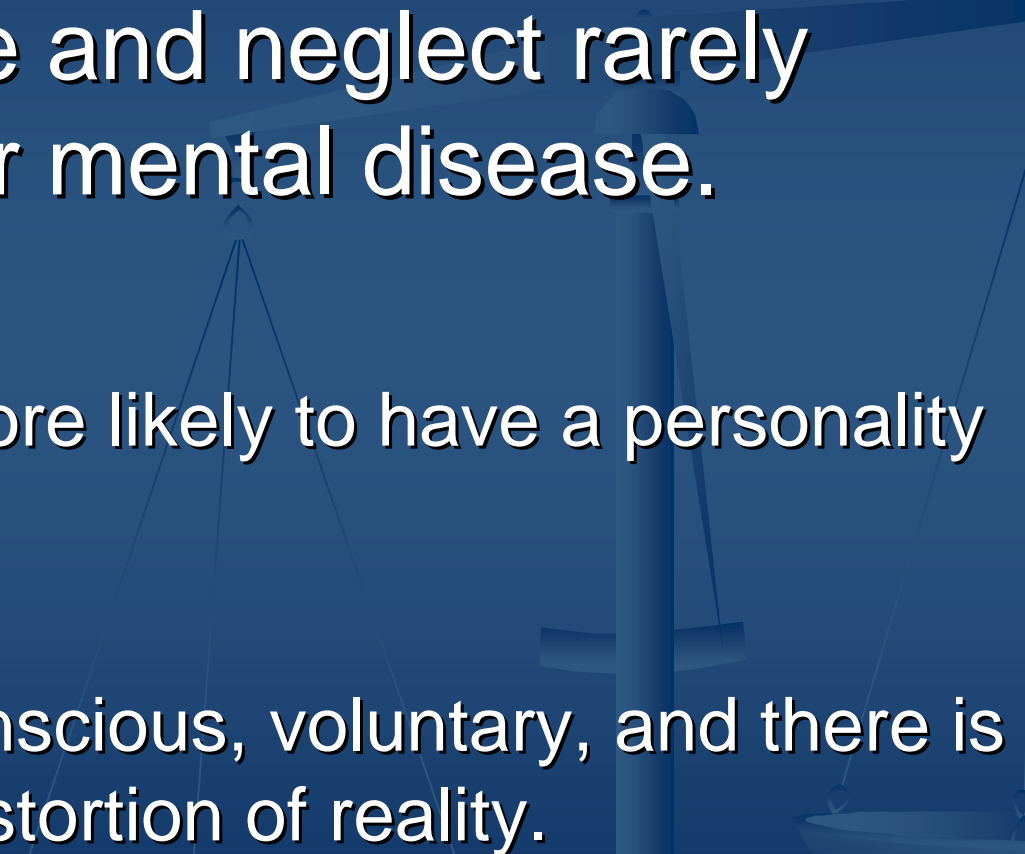
Neonaticide

- Most common motive in neonaticide is due to child not being wanted due to the stigma of pregnancy out of wedlock....ashamed, fearful, denial, psychologically isolated, concealment, denial....
- Effects of denial can be so great that some women do not show changes in body contour, such as abdominal girth...some women continue menstrual bleeding during pregnancy.

Neonaticide

- One consequence of denial of pregnancy is failure to form a significant affective bond with the fetus (Meyer and Oberman, 2001).
 - Women who commit neonaticide may simply view their fetus as a foreign body passing through them (Lewis & Resnick, 1999).

Fatal maltreatment filicide:

- Parental abuse and neglect rarely involve a major mental disease.
 - The parent is more likely to have a personality disorder.
 - The acts are conscious, voluntary, and there is no delusional distortion of reality.
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Spouse revenge filicide:

- Although borderline personality and dependent personality disorder are common diagnoses, these do not qualify as diseases for purposes of insanity.
 - The motive is rational and not based on psychosis.
 - Almost never NGRI

“Acutely Psychotic” Filicide

- This designation includes parents who killed under the influence of hallucinations, epilepsy, or delirium.
 - It does not include all of the psychotic child murders.
 - This is the weakest category because it contains those cases in which no comprehensible motive could be ascertained.
 - Not likely to attempt to hide crime.

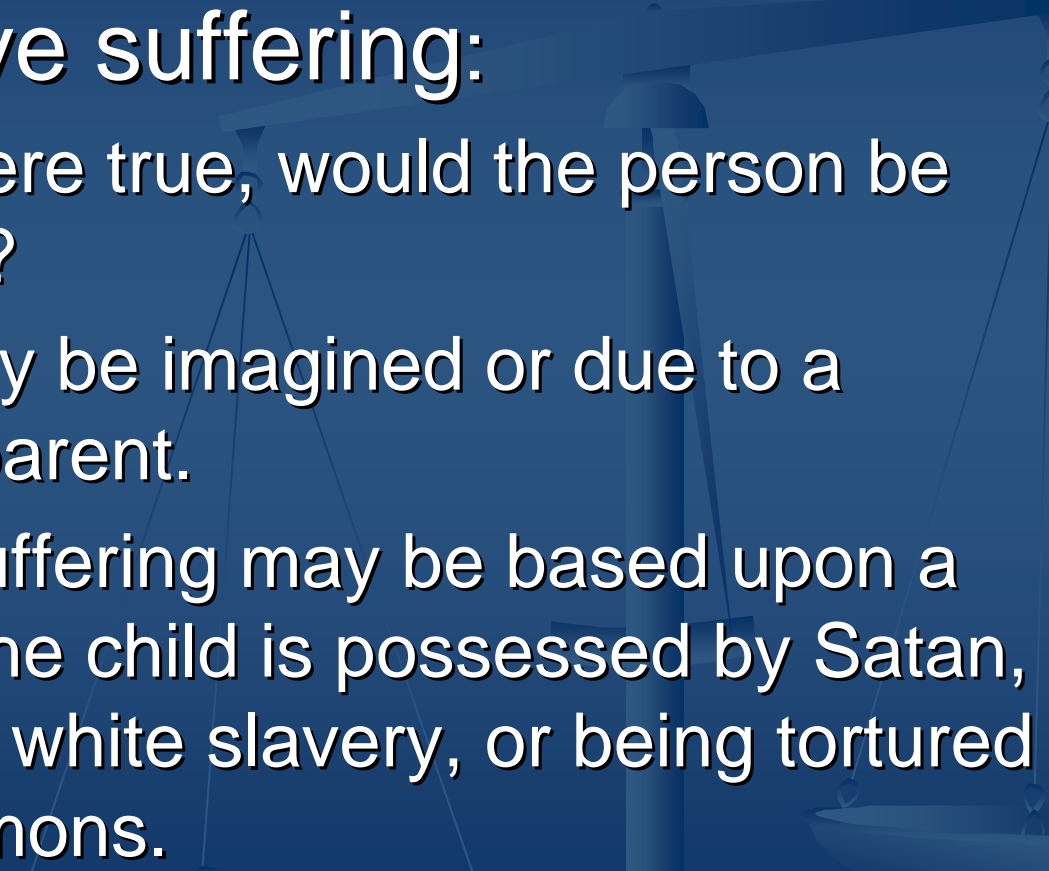
Altruistic Filicide

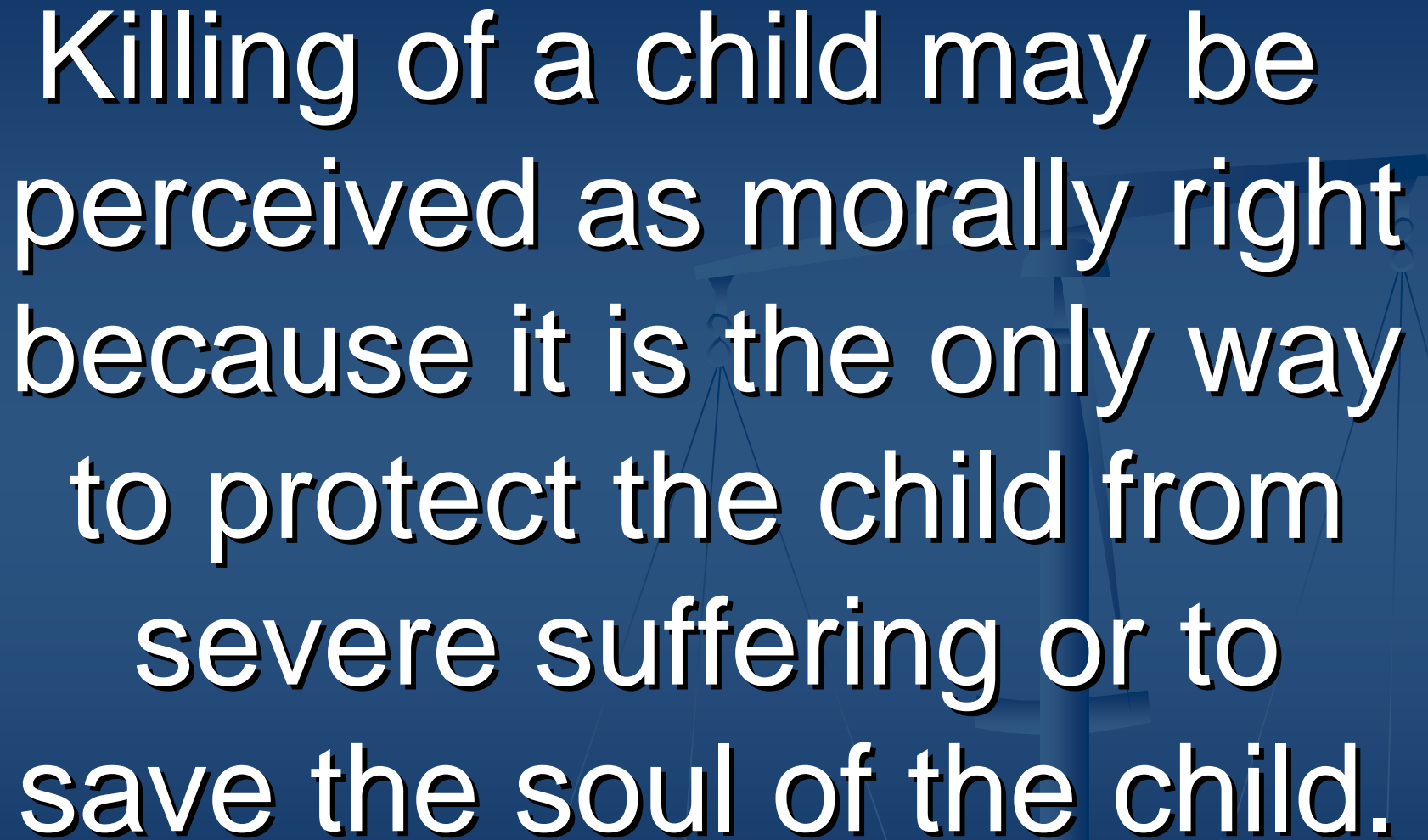
- Associated with suicide
 - These mothers see their children as an extension of themselves.
 - They do not want to leave a child motherless in a “cruel” world as seen through their depressed eyes.
- Altruistic filicide to relieve victim suffering.
 - The suffering may be real or imagined.
 - Want to relieve child from unbearable suffering

Societal Views

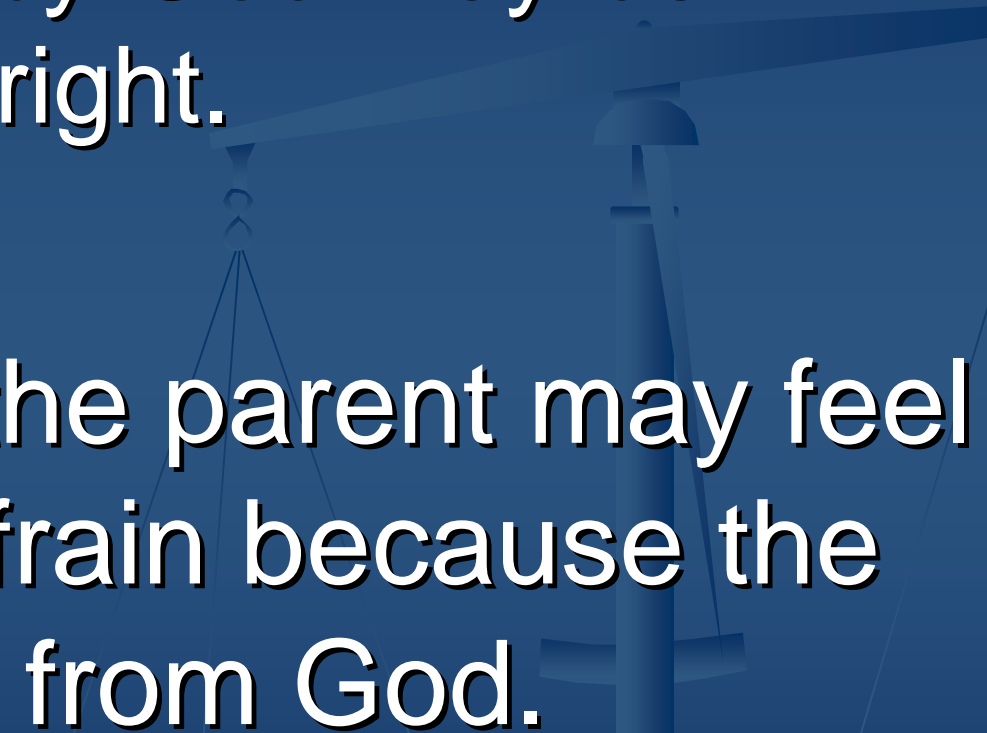
- Psychosis once believed to be demonic possession (1999)
- Evil is the default category for acts society does not have the ability to understand (Corrigan & Watson, 2004).

Insanity Defense in Filicide

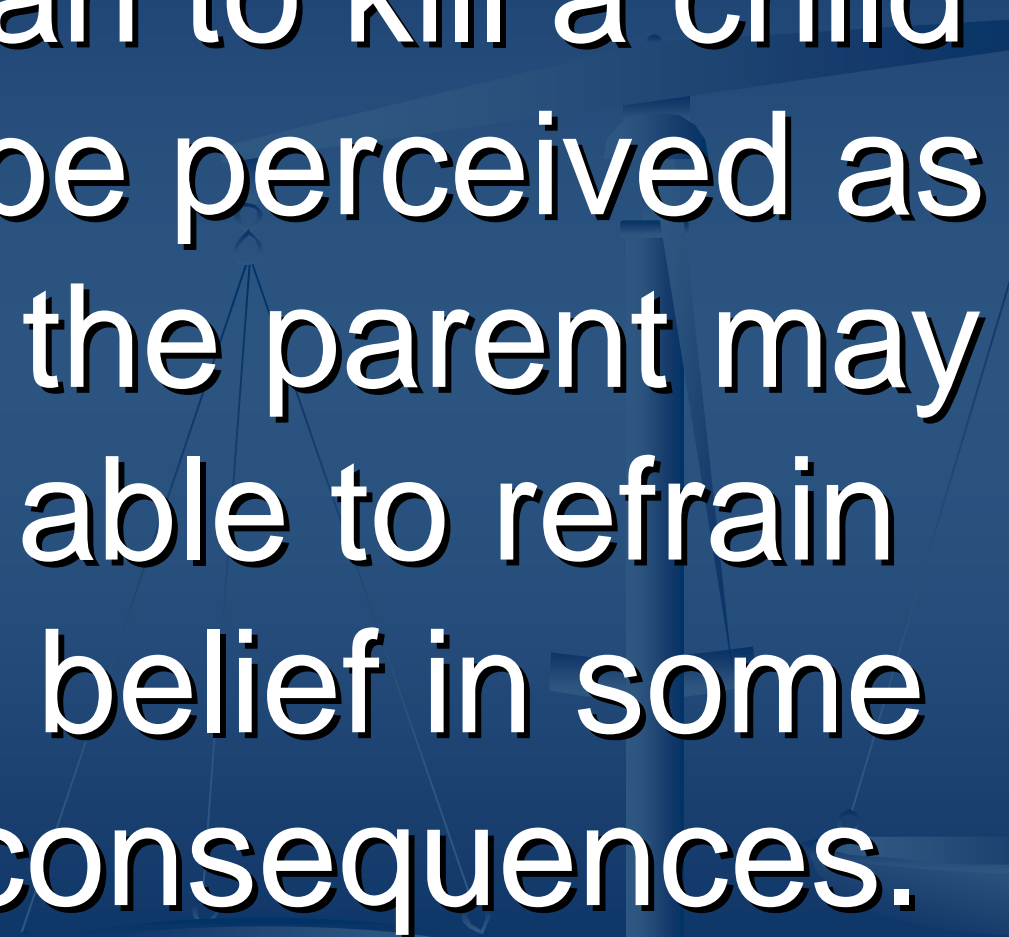
- Filicide to relieve suffering:
 - If the delusion were true, would the person be justified in killing?
 - The suffering may be imagined or due to a delusion by the parent.
 - The perceived suffering may be based upon a false belief that the child is possessed by Satan, being forced into white slavery, or being tortured by imaginary demons.
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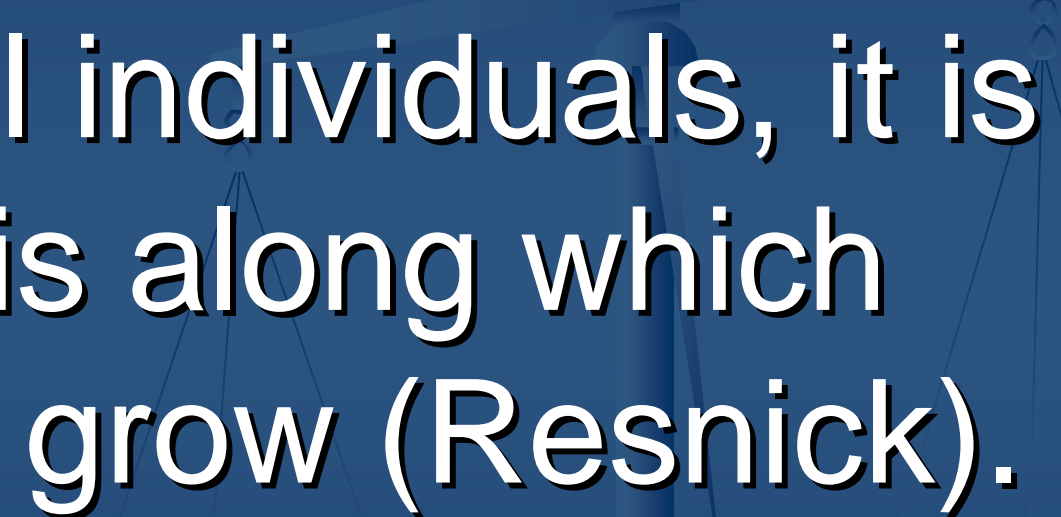
Killing of a child may be perceived as morally right because it is the only way to protect the child from severe suffering or to save the soul of the child.

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- Responding to a command hallucination by God may be perceived as right.
 - In addition, the parent may feel unable to refrain because the command is from God.

A command hallucination from Satan to kill a child may not be perceived as right, but the parent may not feel able to refrain due to a belief in some severe consequences.

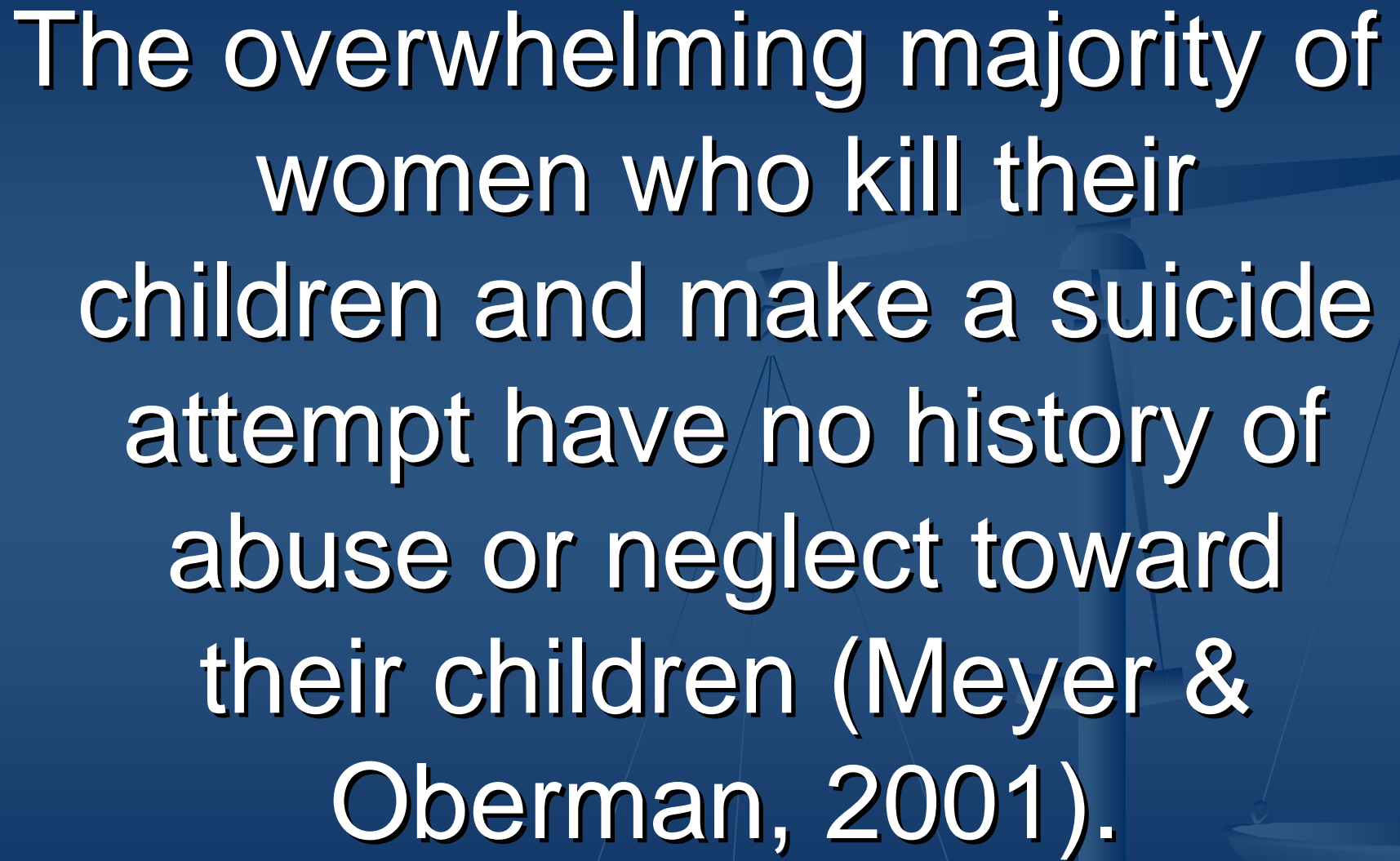


Religion is not the cause of delusions, but for some mentally ill individuals, it is the trellis along which delusions grow (Resnick).



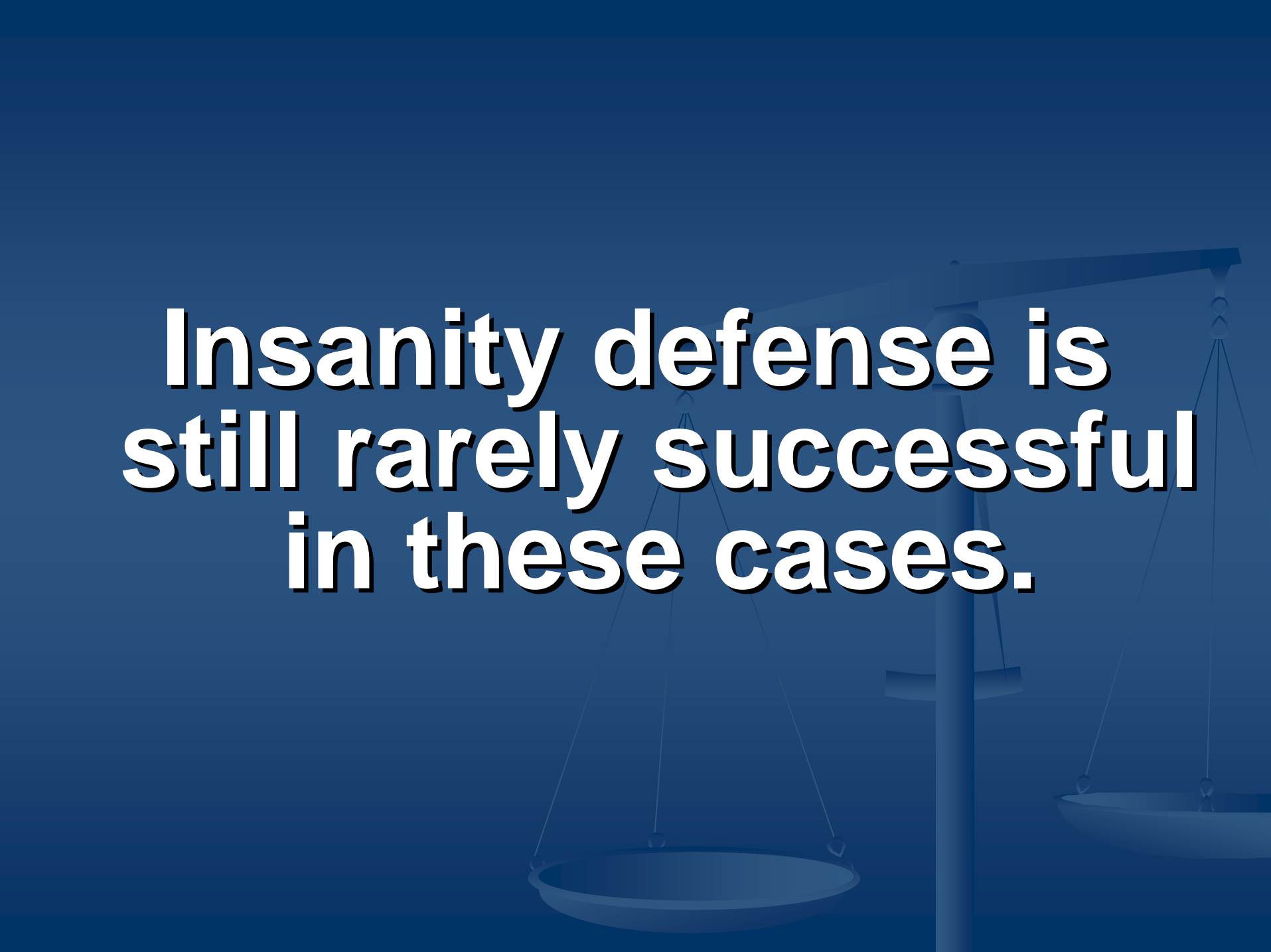
Stats on the Insanity Defense in Filicide:

- **67% of women who kill their children are mentally ill, as opposed to only 6% of those who kill their spouses.**
- **Husband killers commonly have antisocial personalities but child killers do not (Totman, 1978).**

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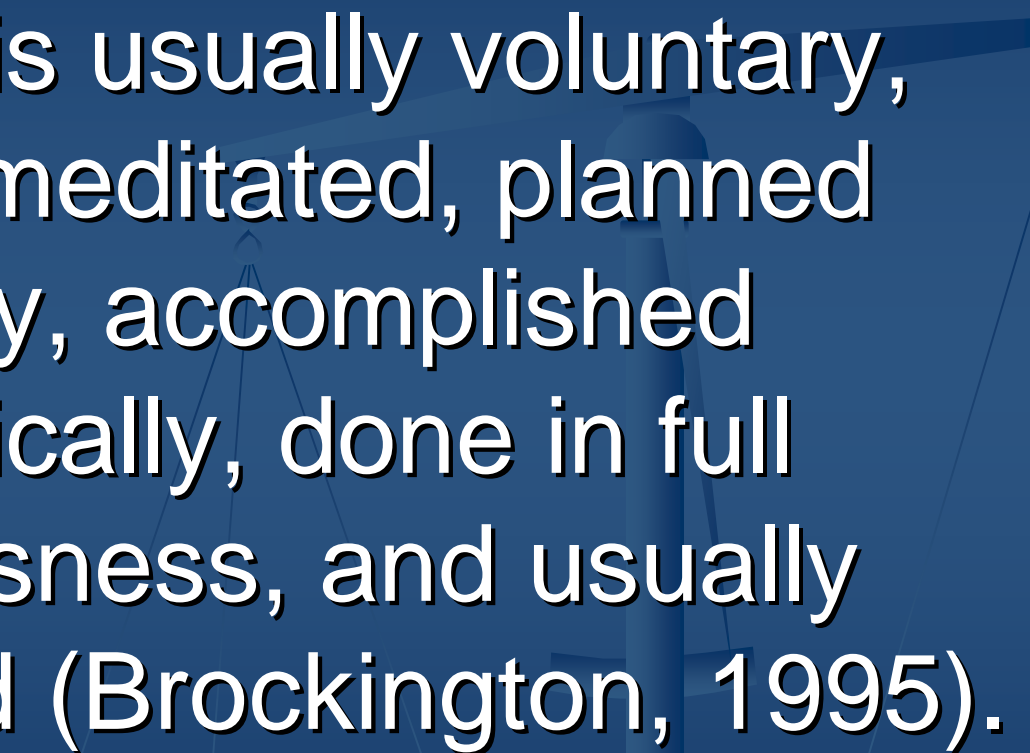
The overwhelming majority of women who kill their children and make a suicide attempt have no history of abuse or neglect toward their children (Meyer & Oberman, 2001).

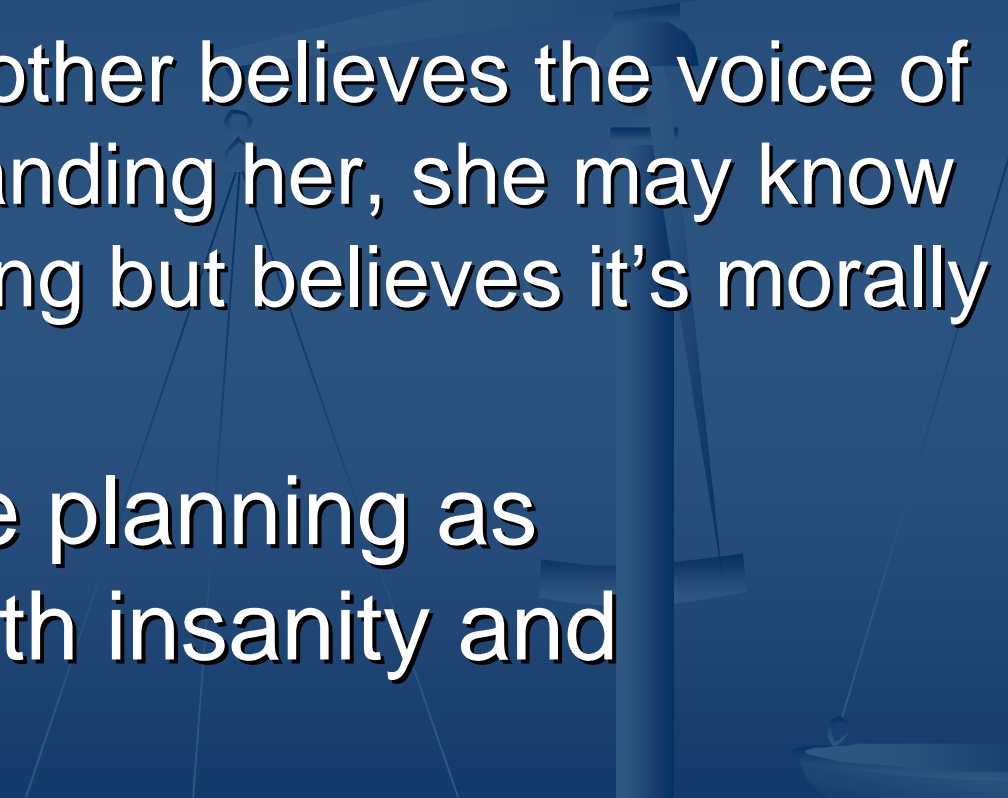
Mothers who kill their children with psychotic motives are more likely to confess, more likely to attempt suicide at the time of the crime, and more likely to have sought help or given warnings before the crime (Lewis & Resnick, 1999).

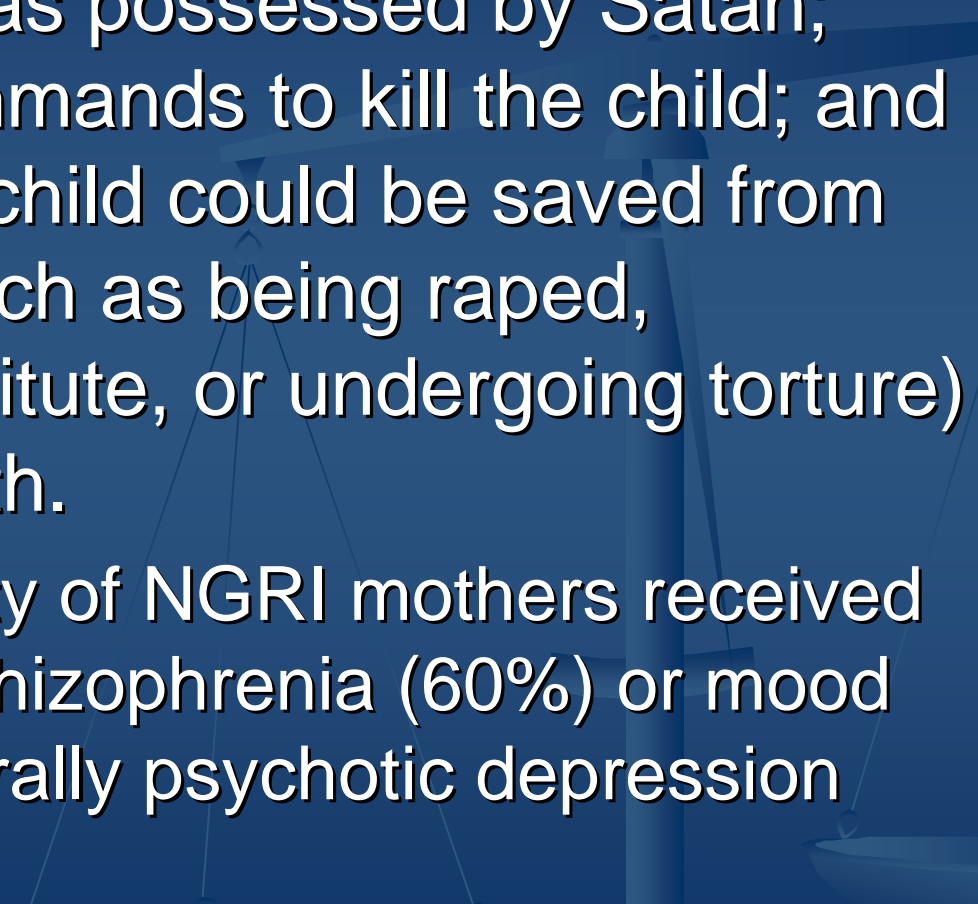


**Insanity defense is
still rarely successful
in these cases.**

Altruistic filicide even in a psychotic individual is usually voluntary, often premeditated, planned logically, accomplished methodically, done in full consciousness, and usually remembered (Brockington, 1995).



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- However, many believe that they are acting in the best interest of their children based on delusional beliefs.
 - If psychotic mother believes the voice of God is commanding her, she may know it's legally wrong but believes it's morally right.
 - Juries perceive planning as inconsistent with insanity and psychosis

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- Common themes included delusional beliefs that the child was defective or monstrous in some way, such as possessed by Satan; hallucinatory commands to kill the child; and the idea that the child could be saved from disaster (fates such as being raped, becoming a prostitute, or undergoing torture) only through death.
 - The vast majority of NGRI mothers received diagnoses of schizophrenia (60%) or mood disorders, generally psychotic depression (35%).

Special Issues in Treatment

- Dangerousness Risk
- Forensic vs. Clinical
- High Profile Patients
- Individual Therapy
- Group Therapy



Women's Issues Group

■ Population Served

- specifically targeted for women with similar crimes and mental health needs
- was a closed group designed to meet the needs of women, who have committed maternal filicide and fit in either the acutely psychotic and/or altruistic category with regard to motive

Women's Issues Group

■ Focus of Group

- grief, coping with loss (including divorce)
- symptom management, mental health education
- strategies for coping with media attention and reactions from others
- realistic plans for successful reintegration into the community
- understanding specifics about early warning signs, symptoms, and delusional system
- addressing how their lives have changed and redefining their “roles”
- examining religious issues if related to past psychosis

Conclusion & Questions...



Contact Us.....

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Related Publication

- Shipley, S. L. (2007). Perpetrators and victims: maternal filicide and mental illness. In R. Muraskin (Ed.), *It's a Crime: Women and Justice, Fourth Edition*, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.