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psychiatry in the Old Testament

King David: an episode of acute stress disorder during the brief life and premature death of Bathsheba's baby

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The second book of Samuel tells the story of how King David took a fancy to Bathsheba who was at the time the wife of another man. When their first child was born, David became abruptly mute, refused to eat or drink and appeared to be considering suicide for a brief period. However, as soon as the child had died he recovered quickly, a picture suggestive of an ICD–10 acute stress disorder.

2 Sam. 11:2 'It happened, late one afternoon, when David rose from his couch, and was walking about on the roof of the King's house that he saw a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful. 3 David sent someone to inquire about the woman. It was reported 'This is Bathsheba daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite'. 4 So David sent messages to fetch her and she came to him and he lay with her. (Now she was purifying herself after her period.) Then she returned to her house. 5 The woman conceived and she sent and told David "I am pregnant."'

The story goes on describe how David gets rid of Uriah, by arranging for him to be sent to the front in the war against the Aramaeans where the fighting was most intense and where a certain death in battle awaited him:

11:26 'When the wife of Uriah heard that her husband was dead, she made lamentation for him. 27 When the mourning was over David sent and brought her to his house and she became his wife and bore him a son. But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord and the Lord sent Nathan to David'.

The prophet Nathan admonished David for the crime of stealing Uriah's wife and then arranging for him to be killed and told him that he would be punished for it as 'the child that is born to you, shall die'.

12.15 'The Lord struck the child that Uriah's wife bore to David, and it became very ill. 16 David pleaded with God for the child; David fasted and went in and lay all night on the ground. The elders of his house stood besides him, urging him to rise from the ground: but he would not nor did he eat food with them. On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead: for they said while the child was alive we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us; how then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm.'

When David hears that the child is dead he recovers rapidly and once more talks to his servants, then anoints himself and starts to eat again.

ICD–10 describes acute stress reaction (F43.0) as 'a transient disorder of significant severity which develops in an individual in response to exceptional physical and/or mental stress and which usually subsides within hours or days. The symptoms typically include an initial state of daze . . . followed by further withdrawal from the surrounding situation (to the extent of a dissociative stupor) or by agitation or overactivity. Symptoms usually appear within minutes of the impact of the stressful stimulus and disappear within 2–3 days'. Following the birth of his baby David is acutely distressed, becomes dazed as he is mute; he fails to respond to his servants, nor does he eat or drink, and the servants think he may harm himself. However, the condition resolves very rapidly once the baby dies, with the whole episode lasting for less than 7 days.

The moral tutorial that the prophet Nathan gives to David that not even a king should lust after another man's wife has been often recounted by priests and rabbis over the ages, but the equally useful psychiatric tutorial on ICD–10 acute stress reaction as described in this ancient text is rarely, if ever, cited.

The British Journal of Psychiatry (2011)
198, 384. doi: 10.1192/bjp.198.5.384