

# Susan smith: a dsm iv analysis essay



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Susan Smith: A DSM IV Analysis Abnormal Psychology November 15, 2010

Susan Smith: A DSM IV Analysis On October 25, 1994, late in the evening.

Susan Smith decided to take her two sons, Michael and Alex for a drive; little did they know it would be their last. Susan Smith drove her two sleeping children to a ramp off of a lake, jumped out of the car, released the brake, and stood by as the car drifted off and descended into the water.

There is no doubt that this unspeakable act was not just a random, isolated moment of insanity of a young mother, but was the most extreme breaking point in a life that was poisoned early on by instability and abuse. To a healthy individual, there is no reasonable explanation for someone to commit such an act, but in Susan Smith's mind, the months, and even years leading up to this horrible night are relevant. In this essay, the DSM IV will be used to construct a general psychological analysis of Susan Smith and what theoretical perspective offers the best explanation for her behavior(Montaldo, 2010). Susan Smith's life was plagued with tragedies and abuse.

When she was seven years old, her parents divorced, then just five weeks later, her father committed suicide. This devastated Susan to the point that she became very distant(Montaldo, 2010). It wasn't long before Susan's mother remarried to a successful businessman. On the surface, the family appeared to be normal, but underneath the all-American family facade, incest was the families deepest secret. For many years, Susan Smith's step father carried on an inappropriate sexual relationship with her.

When Susan tried to report the abuse to her mother and to social services, little was done other than the step father moving out for a short while.

Susan's mother and the rest of the family was more concerned with their reputation being publicly questioned rather than the safety and mental health of Susan. Susan's stepfather eventually moved back in only to continue to subject Susan to more sexual abuse(Montaldo, 2010). Susan Smiths behavior can be described as constantly needing affection and is always depressed when she is alone.

Susan Smith also displayed narcissistic characteristics because of her apparent inability to separate her delusional fantasies from reality and her inability to put her children's needs before her own. Reflecting on her childhood history, Susan had a tendency to be depressed, and this began after the death of her father, whom which she was very close to. One can argue that Susan was psychologically destabilized from feelings of betrayal which stemmed from her father's suicide, her step father's sexual abuse, a mother who looks the other way, her husband's infidelity and being strung along by a number of other lovers(Stronger, 2006). Based on the personality assessment described, it is possible that Susan Smith suffers from dependent personality disorder.

Dependent personality disorder occurs when an individual has significant difficulty functioning without the guidance of others(Stronger, 2006). The DSM-IV lists these characteristics for dependent personality disorder that coincides with Susan Smith's behavior: 1) Difficulty in making everyday decisions without excessive advice and reassurance 2) Needs others to assume responsibility for major areas of his/her life 3) Goes to excessive

lengths to obtain nurturance and support to the point of volunteering to do things that are unpleasant 4) Uncomfortable or helpless when alone due to exaggerated fears of being unable to care for him/herself 5) Urgently seeks another source of care and support when a close relationship ends 6) Unrealistically preoccupied with fears of being left to take care of him/herself (Stronger, 2006). Additionally, DPD is classified under the DSM-IV as a Cluster C personality disorder because of the anxious or fearful traits. Also, females are more likely to be classified under a Cluster C disorder(Stronger, 2006).

Placing Susan Smith under a theoretical perspective that offers the best explanation to what drove her behavior is challenging. On one hand, the behavioral perspective could easily connect because clearly the only reinforcements in Susan's life were mostly negative and that was from her mother and her stepfather. Susan Smith could have observed her mother's relationships with men as only out of convenience and neediness, a trait that Susan quickly adopted. Her sexually abusive stepfather may have taught her that sex was the only way to gain acceptance and love, which is something that Susan continually demonstrated in many unhealthy and distorted relationships. On the other hand, the psychodynamic perspective relates because perhaps Susan Smith's abnormal behavior stemmed from conscious and unconscious, unresolved conflicts. This could also be viewed from a biological perspective (genetic factors) because Susan's father had apparent psychological abnormalities, given that his life ended by suicide(Sarason & Sarason, 2005).

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