

## Comparison of the Effects of Dreams on Relatives of the Deceased in the Mourning Process

Fatma Zehra Fidan\*

Associate Professor, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey.

**\*Correspondence:**

Fatma Zehra Fidan, Associate Professor, Manisa Celal Bayar University, Turkey, Tel: +90 545 955 5641.

**Received:** 26 Feb 2025; **Accepted:** 07 Apr 2025; **Published:** 15 April 2025

**Citation:** Fatma Zehra Fidan. Comparison of the Effects of Dreams on Relatives of the Deceased in the Mourning Process. *Addict Res.* 2025; 9(1): 1-6.

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Dreams not only impact the individual lives of those bereaved by suicide but also shape societal perceptions. The Decree Laws (Kanun Hükmünde Kararnameler, KHK), implemented in Turkey following the July 15, 2016, coup attempt, are undemocratic measures exempt from judicial oversight and grant broad powers. These laws have deprived tens of thousands of people of their jobs, social rights, and reputations, causing significant societal trauma.

**Objective:** This study aims to compare the dream experiences of those bereaved by suicides related to the Decree Laws (KHK) with those bereaved by other suicides. It further seeks to examine how these dreams influence the grieving process.

**Methodology:** In-depth interviews were conducted with a mother and a father who lost their children to suicide. The data were analyzed using content analysis.

**Findings:** Personal Dreams: The dreams experienced by individuals bereaved by suicide provided an outlet for suppressed emotions and played an active role in alleviating negative feelings.

**Dreams Reported by Others:** Dreams reported by others strengthened the metaphysical perceptions of those bereaved by KHK-related suicides. These dreams helped reduce the effects of social stigma and contributed to the families finding peace.

**Conclusion:** Dreams are powerful tools that facilitate the grieving process, alleviate emotional burdens, and provide comfort through metaphysical meanings. Further research on the psychological and spiritual effects of dreams could inspire the development of new methods in trauma and grief therapy.

### Keywords

Suicide bereavement, Grief, Dreams, Stigma, Social exclusion, Content analysis.

### Introduction

Suicide is a complex social phenomenon [1] that leaves profound psychological, social, and physical effects on those left behind [2-4]. This type of loss often brings intense stigma and social exclusion [3,5-10] to those grieving. Suicide, which has been prohibited by most religions [11,12] and coded as a “bad death” [13,14], creates trauma that is challenging to heal for the bereaved [15,16].

Religion can play both a protective role [17-19] and a role that exacerbates trauma during the grieving process after suicide [4,20-23]. While religious beliefs can provide consolation and a sense of meaning for some individuals [17,18], the perception of suicide as a religiously forbidden act can intensify feelings of guilt and stigma among the bereaved [20,24,25]. However, suicides that have occurred in Turkey due to the Decree Laws (KHK) are framed differently in public perception. Individuals deprived of their jobs and social status by the KHK experience “civil and social death” [26], which has driven some of them (approximately 130 people) to suicide. Dreams are significant psychological [27,28] and

cultural experiences [29,30] that influence the emotional state of individuals during the grieving process [31]. They are considered reflections of individuals' subconscious thoughts [32,35,] shaped by life experiences [36], and contributors to emotional healing [37,38]. However, cultural and religious factors [39] significantly influence the perception and impact of dreams [40].

For example, seeing loved ones lost to suicide in dreams can provide emotional solace for some individuals [38,41], while triggering feelings of guilt for others [42].

This study aims to compare the dream experiences of relatives of individuals who died by suicide due to the Decree Laws (KHK) with those of other suicide victims, exploring the effects of these dreams on the grieving process. The study is expected to make a significant contribution to the literature, particularly regarding the role of dreams in trauma and healing. To date, no comparative research has been conducted in this area, and this study aspires to offer an original contribution to the field.

### Participants

The study analyzes the impact of dreams on two participants: a mother and a father who lost their children to suicide. The mother, a 51-year-old teacher, lost her 19-year-old daughter, a university student undergoing six years of psychiatric treatment, to suicide. She expressed feelings of guilt regarding her daughter's death. The father, a 47-year-old teacher dismissed under the Decree Laws (KHK), was imprisoned due to the state's unlawful political practices. During this period, his 16-year-old son died by suicide. The father's primary concern regarding his son's suicide is religious in nature.

### Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, which provide opportunities for obtaining in-depth information, were chosen as the research method. Open-ended questions [43] were prepared by an expert researcher. The interviews aimed to explore the factors influencing the grieving process. Each session lasted approximately one hour, was transcribed by the researcher, and analyzed using the content analysis method.

### Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, a qualitative research technique that allows for an understanding of participants' emotions, thoughts, and experiences related to the research topic [44]. A well-prepared semi-structured interview guide is effective for deeply exploring the research question [43]. The interviewer's empathetic attitude [45] and objective, unbiased approach [46] are beneficial for both parties: the researcher gains access to sensitive information [44,47], while participants better interpret their own experiences [45].

### Content Analysis Method

Content analysis is one of the most powerful methods for systematically interpreting qualitative data in its appropriate context [48]. The essence of communication lies in understanding

the intended meaning [49]. Therefore, the content representing the intended meaning should be analyzed in line with the participants' intent [50]. The analysis process involves four stages: coding the data, identifying themes, organizing the data according to these codes and themes, and interpretation [51,52].

### Content Analysis of Data

Dreams observed during the grieving process are closely linked to individuals' thoughts and beliefs about suicide. The main concerns of suicide survivors shape the themes of their dreams, and participants seek answers to their questions based on the content of these dreams. The content and impact of the participants' dreams can be analyzed under two main headings.

#### a) The Mother Feeling Guilt and Anger Over Her Daughter's Suicide and the Role of Dreams

G-X feels guilt for not recognizing that her daughter was on the verge of suicide: (*My daughter was a smart child and could hide her feelings. We couldn't realize how severe her condition was or do anything about it.*) Her daughter's ability to conceal her struggles has not alleviated the participant's guilt. In this case, the anger (24) is directed inward, towards herself: (*I didn't get angry at my daughter or God. I was angriest at myself.*) G-X associates suicide not with God or religion but directly with life and the individual: (*I can't position suicide within a religious context. I see it as a part of life. Death is God's will, and I can't question that, but suicide has nothing to do with the other world; it's about this world.*)

G-X's approach to suicide is marked by a deep longing for her daughter: (We were beautiful together; now a part of us is missing. She was a big child not just in weight and height but in the color she brought to life. There's a huge void in our home.) and profound guilt. However, the dream she experienced significantly alleviated her distress.

*"We already made peace; she came to my dream. She... [apologized] 'I didn't mean to,' she said in my dream, and she hugged me. I also said, 'Forgive me for all the wrongs I've done until now.' Maybe it's an unconscious dream; I don't know, but we made peace in my dream."* (G-X)

In the participant's narrative, making peace signifies mutual forgiveness. The dream carries traces of G-X's suppressed anger toward her daughter: (*She... [apologized] 'I didn't mean to.'*) The hidden anger, which G-X had not even admitted to herself: (*I didn't get angry at my daughter.*), surfaced through the dream. The participant's profound guilt: (*Forgive me for all the wrongs I've done until now.*) was significantly reduced through this reconciliation in the dream. Despite acknowledging the possibility of an unconscious origin of the dream: (*Maybe it's an unconscious dream.*), the scientific explanation did not diminish the dream's emotional impact on G-X.

#### b) Discovery of the Metaphysical Through Dreams of Others and Inner Peace

It is not necessary for the bereaved to personally experience dreams in which the deceased communicates a message. Sometimes,

a dream seen by another person can provide a more impactful resolution to the bereaved's distress.

### Participant Context

G-Y was in prison at the time of his son's suicide. Meanwhile, his son was experiencing the consequences of being associated with a parent dismissed under the Decree Laws (KHK) in his social life. (He used to say, 'My father is a man who prays, yet they call him a terrorist. Why do they say that?' We can't even understand the burden he carried.)

For G-Y, the societal impact, conceptualized as a "burden," acquires a positive meaning in the context of suicide. Defining himself as a devout Muslim, G-Y evaluates his son's suicide within a broad perspective that remains faithful to a religious framework: "In religious belief, there is a prohibition [against suicide], but there's also the state of insanity... Moreover, my son's age is one that can be debated religiously. Reaching maturity is not about age but about grasping the truth. This can happen at 14 or at 17... And then there are the events that pushed him to that state, the ones that took his mind away..." (G-Y)

G-Y adheres to the religious framework that explicitly forbids suicide. However, his son's young age (16) and the stigma he perceived from societal exclusion (*Your father is a terrorist!*) justify, in G-Y's view, the possibility of his son experiencing a state of "insanity." In Islamic theology, insanity and childhood exempt an individual from responsibility for their actions [53].

Despite his personal reasoning, it is clear that G-Y has not fully overcome his religious concerns: "When we are troubled, God sends something... There are dreams that give us peace."

Those who dreamed about the deceased were members of the religious community to which G-Y feels connected.

### Dream I:

"Someone we didn't know dreamt that Burhan [the deceased son] looked distressed and recited *Ayet-el Kürsi* [a Quranic verse] to him in the dream. Then, the next day in the dream, he saw Burhan among a group of children, looking well. He asked, 'Burhan, are you happy here?' and Burhan said, 'I'm happy here.' The dreamer described many children dressed in white. Among them, Burhan welcomed her and said, 'Welcome.' She extended her hands and asked, 'Burhan, should I lift you to paradise from here?' Burhan replied, 'Sister, I'm waiting for my mom and dad; I'll leave with them.' Then another woman approached the dreamer and said, 'Do you recognize me?' The dreamer said, 'No, I don't.' The woman said, 'I'm Fatma. All these children are under my protection until their parents arrive.' Fatma, our sacred mother, is protecting Burhan in this way." (G-Y)

G-Y's emphasis on not knowing the dreamer underscores his desire to validate the dream as metaphysical and untouched by psychological influences. The figure of Fatma, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, holds immense religious significance. In

G-Y's interpretation, her words and actions in the dream represent unequivocal divine reassurance.

### Dream II:

"My brother, who was also dismissed under KHK, was imprisoned in Istanbul. My son's situation was discussed in his ward. Someone from his ward had a dream about my son: 'Three children dressed in white came, and one introduced himself, saying, 'I am Burhan.' I said, 'Welcome, Burhan,' and I tried to wake everyone in the ward, shouting, 'Get up, Burhan is here!' Then, an elder in the ward came and said, 'Son, these are angels. Allah has shown them only to you, so don't force others to see them because they can't. These angels are visible only to you.' My brother later wrote me a letter saying, 'I was overjoyed, brother.' The person who saw the dream said Burhan's hair was long, reaching his shoulders. That's how he looked in his final days, with long hair. Someone who had never met him saw him as he truly was.'" (G-Y)

The emphasis on the color white in the dreams that positively influenced G-Y and his social circle (*My brother wrote me a letter, saying, 'I was overjoyed, brother.'*) is significant in affirming innocence. The depiction of children in white clothing as angels further underscores this theme of purity. Additionally, the representation of the deceased in their true form in the dream, rather than the image used in the newspapers, reinforces G-Y's perception that the dream is an authentic "message from God."

### Dream III:

"A woman dreamt that she was looking for her spiritual guide, and upon learning that he had gone to help in the earthquake zone (referring to the February 6 earthquake in Turkey), she went there too. 'I went to the earthquake zone and saw our dark-haired boy (Burhan) there. I hugged him and said, 'What are you doing here?' He replied, 'Sister, we came here for the earthquake. The elders are helping the elders, and we're helping the children; that's why we're here.' He was wearing a completely white robe, something woolen. He said, 'Sister, you'll get cold here,' and put his robe on me. Then he said, 'Send my regards.' I asked, 'To whom, Burhan? Tell me.' And then I woke up. I saw this dream on Tuesday night... It turns out I was meeting you on Wednesday, so he must have sent his regards to you.'" (G-Y). In this dream, the deceased is depicted as contributing to the relief of earthquake victims, highlighting his virtuous character. Once again, the recurring motif of white clothing and traditional garments (robe) emphasizes his innocence and moral integrity.

The positive influence of these dreams, seen by others, is encapsulated in G-Y's expression: "God sweetened our mouths with the honey we needed." The recurring themes of innocence and virtue in dreams seen by others reflect the favorable societal perception of individuals who died by suicide due to the KHK.

## Findings

### Individual Dreams

- Dreams experienced by bereaved relatives of suicide victims alleviated intense emotions such as deep guilt, anger, and

- longing, providing emotional relief.
- Dreams allowed suppressed subconscious feelings to surface.

### Dreams Seen by Others

- Dreams experienced by others strengthened the metaphysical perceptions of suicide survivors.
- Among families affected by the Decree Laws (KHK), societal exclusion and stigma that contributed to the suicides were reinterpreted and accepted through metaphysical messages in dreams.
- Symbols in dreams (e.g., children in white clothing, angelic figures) and positive messages reinforced beliefs in the deceased's innocence and virtuous character.
- Dreams helped reduce the effects of societal stigma, contributing to the families' sense of peace.
- Religious images (e.g., Fatma, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad) and metaphysical figures frequently appearing in dreams provided a source of security and hope for participants with strong religious beliefs.

### Evaluation

This study highlights the individual nature of dreams, as emphasized by Jung [53-55]. The findings support the understanding that dreams serve as a tool for making sense of traumatic experiences and alleviating emotional burdens [30,36]. Particularly intense emotions, such as guilt and anger, were reframed through dreams, facilitating individuals' ability to move forward with their lives. Dreams reinforced individuals' religious beliefs, offering a framework for the religious resolution of traumatic events like suicide. Religious symbols reduced concerns about stigmatization and helped individuals cope with the negative impacts of social exclusion. For KHK-affected families, dreams seen by others facilitated the reinterpretation of societal injustices within a metaphysical context, helping individuals accept and cope with their trauma.

### Conclusion

The research demonstrates that the meaning attributed to dreams by relatives of suicide victims has profound individual and societal impacts. Dreams have functioned as powerful tools that facilitate the grieving process, alleviate emotional burdens, and provide comfort through metaphysical interpretations. The frequent appearance of religious imagery in dreams has been particularly effective in helping individuals make sense of the religious and societal questions triggered by suicide.

### Limitations of the Study

The primary limitation of this study is the small and homogeneous sample size.

### Directions for Future Research

- Future studies should expand the sample to include a broader range of relationships with the deceased (e.g., children, siblings, spouses, cousins, friends) to explore diverse outcomes and solutions.

- Research evaluating the effects of psychological and spiritual counseling services on suicide survivors could contribute to the literature.

### Key Message

Globally, and in Turkey, there is an urgent need to focus on building just societies free from stigma and social exclusion.

### Solutions and Recommendations

- Provide psychological counseling services to help suicide survivors interpret dreams and alleviate the traumatic effects of grief.
- Offer spiritual counseling to help individuals interpret their dream experiences in a religious context, providing solace and understanding.
- Develop metaphysical support programs for families facing social exclusion, helping them find meaning and resilience.
- Organize societal awareness campaigns for families affected by the Decree Laws to reduce the negative effects of stigma.
- Conduct further research on the psychological and spiritual effects of dreams to develop new methods for trauma and grief therapies.

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