

Murder-suicide might be caregiver burnout: Expert

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An Ottawa Police cruiser blocks the laneway of a home at 3204 Pierce Rd., just south of North Gower, on Wednesday, Feb. 20, 2013. The home was the site of a suspected murder-suicide on Tuesday night. (DANIELLE BELL Ottawa Sun)

Peter Thomasing was early in his career as a mechanical engineer when he left his life behind to move to the rural North Gower area to care for his father after a stroke.

He quit his job and traded bustling Calgary for a rural farmhouse where for years he was the primary caregiver for his father, who lost his ability to talk and used a cane.

By all accounts, Thomasing was a good son and neighbour who cared deeply for his dad Jim, a retired teacher from Ottawa.

But on Tuesday night, gunshots shattered the silence — to the shock of family and friends, Peter killed his father then turned the gun on himself.

While those who knew the Thomasings may never get answers, experts say caregiver murder-suicides are not uncommon, although most are spousal situations.

But such scenarios are not cases of mercy killings or assisted suicides, say researchers, but usually situations where caregivers are depressed, overwhelmed and see no other option.

“It’s not malice, it’s not anger, but it’s not love. It is desperation, hopelessness and there’s no way out,” said Donna Cohen, a Florida-based professor and expert on murder-suicides.

“It’s not compassion. It’s not even snapping. He’s probably been planning this for a long time.”

Such a violent end doesn’t mean the son did not love his dad, said Cohen, who believes his commitment shows an “incredible attachment” and compassion.

Thomasing’s engineering background may have also played a role, it is a controlling occupation in a structured life.

In a high-functioning family — Jim taught chemistry, a sister was in the military — the son who wants to do something but can't, can feel like a failure. Tack on isolation and a father who's not getting better, and the aftermath can be tragic.

"You need to be able to do what needs to be done and if you can't do it, it becomes a major obstacle," said Cohen.

"The story of this tragedy is likely wound around the concept of 'I can't control my dad.'"

Caregivers who kill are more likely to commit suicide, and men are more likely to turn to guns to do so, research suggests.

Men are less likely to seek support but there can be signs of burn-out, said Cohen, yet those can be tough to see in rural situations.

And then something, such as dwindling finances or worsening health, that can make staying together impossible, may tip the scales to tragedy.

On Tuesday, it was a 911 call the 39-year-old son made to say he killed his dad, before he turned the gun on himself - but that call is no surprise Cohen.

"He wants it done, he wants it over, he wants his recognition."

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