

Kathy O – Track Star Gone Wrong

The following excerpt is from *Psychology*, a textbook written by social psychologist, Dr. Phillip Zimbardo and Dr. Ann Weber.

As the runners lined up to start the 1986 NCAA 10,000 meter championship race, Kathy O. was the odds-on favorite. She had broken high school track records in three distances and recently set a new American collegiate record for the 10,000 meter race. Her parents, always supportive fans, watched from the sidelines.

Kathy got off to a slow start, but she was only a few paces behind the leaders. Her fans knew she could soon catch up. But this time, Kathy didn't bolt to the lead. Instead, she veered away from the other runners. Without breaking her stride, she ran off the track, scaled a 7-foot fence, raced down a side street, and jumped off a 50-foot bridge.

Ten minutes later, her coach found her on the concrete floodplain of the White River. She had two broken ribs and a punctured lung, and she was paralyzed from the waist down. Not only would she never run again, she might never walk again.

What happened to Kathy? Why did she quit the race and nearly self-destruct? As a star athlete and premed student on the dean's list, Kathy had everything going for her. She had been valedictorian of her high school class. Teachers and coaches described her as sweet, diligent, courteous and religious. Nobody understood her behavior. It didn't make sense.

Kathy's father thought the tragedy "had something to do with the pressure that is put on young people to succeed." Teammates felt the pressures may have come from within Kathy herself. "She was a perfectionist," said one of them. Determined to excel at everything, Kathy had studied relentlessly, even during team workouts.

How did Kathy explain her actions? She told an interviewer that she was overcome by the terrifying fear of failure as she began falling behind in the race. "All of a sudden....I felt like something snapped inside me." She felt angry and persecuted. These negative reactions were new to Kathy, and they made her feel as if she were someone else. "I just wanted to run away," she recalled. "I don't see how I climbed that fence....I just don't feel like that person was me. I know that it sounds strange, but I was just out of control....I was watching everything that was happening and I couldn't stop."

***Directions – Explain Kathy O's behavior using each of the following concepts: Biological Perspective, Behavioral Perspective, Cognitive Perspective, Humanist Perspective, Psychoanalytical Perspective, Socio-Cultural Perspective, and Evolutionary Perspective.**

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