

*This opinion is nonprecedential except as provided by
Minn. R. Civ. App. P. 136.01, subd. 1(c).*

**STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN COURT OF APPEALS
A22-1756**

State of Minnesota,
Respondent,

vs.

Blake Robert Searles,
Appellant.

**Filed September 11, 2023
Affirmed
Ross, Judge**

Ramsey County District Court
File No. 62-CR-20-6811

Keith Ellison, Attorney General, St. Paul, Minnesota; and

John J. Choi, Ramsey County Attorney, Thomas R. Ragatz, Assistant County Attorney, St. Paul, Minnesota (for respondent)

Tayler J. Rahm, Rahm Law, PLLC, Minnetonka, Minnesota (for appellant)

Considered and decided by Worke, Presiding Judge; Ross, Judge; and Bryan, Judge.

NONPRECEDENTIAL OPINION

ROSS, Judge

A woman reported to police that she had been brutally beaten by her boyfriend, Blake Searles. Following a stipulated-evidence bench trial, the district court convicted Searles of third-degree assault, domestic assault by strangulation, and making threats of violence. Searles asserts that the evidence is insufficient to convict him of these crimes. He

also contends that the district court abused its discretion by excluding evidence of the woman's prior suicide attempt and suicidal ideations, and by admitting evidence that Searles previously killed the woman's cat. Because Searles's evidence-insufficiency argument rests solely on the alleged incorrectness of the district court's credibility assessments to which we generally defer on appeal, we reject the argument. And because the district court acted within its discretion by excluding evidence of the woman's prior suicide attempt and suicidal ideations and by admitting the evidence that Searles boasted about killing the woman's cat, his evidentiary arguments fail. We therefore affirm.

FACTS

A woman, whom we will call Beth to maintain her privacy, reported to police in October 2020 that she had been beaten unconscious and strangled by her boyfriend, Blake Searles. She reported that Searles punched her in the eye, grabbed her by her hair, and smashed her head into the wall five or six times, causing her to black out. She awoke to Searles squeezing his hands around her neck. Searles then beat her with a five-foot-long walking stick. He told Beth during the assault that he had killed her cat and said that he wanted to kill her, choking her the same way he killed the cat. Photographs taken of Beth's injuries following the assault depict bruises to her face, a black eye, a red thumbprint on her neck, and bruises and cuts on various parts of her body consistent with being struck with or defending against strikes made by a large stick. Police searched Beth's apartment and found a five-foot-tall walking stick, blood smeared on the door, blood on the carpet, bloody tissues in a trash container, and items strewn about the apartment.

The state charged Searles with third-degree assault, domestic assault by strangulation, and making threats of violence. Searles moved the district court before trial to admit evidence of Beth's mental-health history, including her suicidal ideations around the time of the offense and a prior suicide attempt, to support the possibility that Beth's injuries may have been self-inflicted. The state opposed the motion, arguing that evidence of Beth's mental-health history and prior suicide attempt was highly prejudicial, an invasion of her privacy, and irrelevant. After reviewing Beth's medical records, the district court excluded the evidence as irrelevant because her prior suicide attempt by drug overdose was too dissimilar to the injuries she sustained and because her suicidal ideations were reported after the incident occurred. The district court also ruled that it would allow the state to introduce evidence regarding Searles's allegedly killing Beth's cat.

Searles consented to proceed with a stipulated-evidence bench trial under Minnesota Rule of Criminal Procedure 26.01, subdivision 3. The district court found Searles guilty of all three crimes after making extensive findings of fact, including a finding that the statements Beth made to police describing the assault were credible. Searles appeals his consequent conviction.

DECISION

Searles contends that the state failed to offer sufficient evidence to convict him of the charged crimes. He also contends that the district court wrongly admitted or excluded evidence, entitling him to a new trial. Both arguments fail.

I

The abundant evidence of Searles’s guilt leads us easily to reject his argument that the evidence is insufficient to convict him of his crimes. He implicitly asks us to deem unfounded the district court’s reliance on Beth’s account of what caused her injuries. He characterizes her version of events as “unreliable, inconsistent and not supported by the facts in the record.” In evaluating sufficiency-of-the-evidence challenges, we “carefully examine the record to determine whether the facts and the legitimate inferences drawn from them would permit the factfinder to reasonably conclude that the defendant was guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.” *State v. Waiters*, 929 N.W.2d 895, 900 (Minn. 2019) (quotation omitted). We assume that the factfinder believed the state’s witnesses and disbelieved any contrary evidence. *State v. Moore*, 438 N.W.2d 101, 108 (Minn. 1989). Searles’s argument cannot overcome this standard.

The evidence of Searles’s guilt included mostly Beth’s lengthy and detailed statement to police describing the attack and photographic evidence of her corresponding injuries. The testimony of even a single credible witness is sufficient to support a conviction. *State v. Miles*, 585 N.W.2d 368, 373 (Minn. 1998). Searles asks us to set aside the district court’s credibility finding as it bears on Beth’s statements. The request disregards the great deference we afford the district court’s credibility determinations and its weighing of testimony and evidence. *State v. King*, 990 N.W.2d 406, 420–21 (Minn. 2023). The evidence overwhelmingly supports the district court’s credibility finding and, consequently, the guilty verdict.

II

Searles next argues that the district court made two erroneous evidentiary rulings—one excluding the suicide attempt and ideation evidence and the other allowing the I-killed-your-cat evidence. We review evidentiary decisions for “a clear abuse of discretion.” *State v. Bustos*, 861 N.W.2d 655, 666 (Minn. 2015). Searles bears the burden of showing that the district court abused its discretion and that admitting the evidence prejudiced his defense. *See State v. Peltier*, 874 N.W.2d 792, 802 (Minn. 2016). We are certain that the district court’s evidentiary decisions fell within its discretion.

The district court had reasonable grounds to deem any evidence of Beth’s prior suicide attempt by drug overdose and any evidence that she experienced suicidal ideations near the time of the offense as too attenuated from the circumstances of the charges here to be relevant to Searles’s defense. Searles asserts that his theory of the case centered on Beth’s obtaining her injuries in a failed suicide attempt, speculating at oral argument that perhaps her injuries resulted from falling down the stairs while trying to kill herself. The evidence before the district court makes this hypothesis extremely far-fetched, at best. The district court found the injuries to Beth’s neck to include a “thumb-shaped mark.” The photographs of her injuries include wide, deep, linear bruises, including two on the back of her upper thigh. They included bruises or cuts to her arm. And they included a substantial black eye. The injuries were more extensive than these, but these correspond precisely with Beth’s tearful hospital account depicting the manner of her being thrashed by Searles with the walking stick police found in the apartment, punched in the face, and strangled. It was implicitly clear to the district court that none of these injuries could reasonably have

resulted from some suicide-attempt-related fall, such as a single fall, or even many falls, down the stairs. Although Searles was entitled to an opportunity to present a complete defense, he must still comply with the rules of evidence. *See State v. Jones*, 753 N.W.2d 677, 695 (Minn. 2008). This includes the rule prohibiting irrelevant evidence. *See Minn. R. Evid.* 402. Given the obvious disconnection between Beth’s injuries and Searles’s theory of their origin, the district court acted within its discretion by excluding the suicide-related evidence.

We also reject Searles’s contention that the district court improperly allowed the state to offer evidence that he killed Beth’s cat. The parties dispute whether the alleged killing of a domestic partner’s cat is relationship evidence under Minnesota Statutes section 634.20 (2022). We need not resolve this dispute because Searles’s announcement that he killed Beth’s cat is obviously admissible as evidence supporting an element of one of the charged crimes. To prove that Searles engaged in the crime of threatening violence under Minnesota Statutes section 609.713, subdivision 1 (2020), the state had to establish that Searles “threaten[ed], directly or indirectly, to commit any crime of violence with purpose to terrorize another.” According to the prosecution, as he strangled Beth, Searles told her that he would love to kill her while demonstrating how he had previously killed her cat. The state’s theory, in part, was not that Searles killed Beth’s cat but that he taunted and threatened her in part by claiming to have killed the cat. And the district court found only that Searles told Beth about the killing within the context of his threat. The state is not precluded from presenting evidence of a defendant’s prior bad acts if it is probative in determining the defendant’s guilt of the crime with which he was charged. *State v. Mosby*,

450 N.W.2d 629, 632 (Minn. App. 1990), *rev. denied* (Minn. Mar. 16, 1990). Because Searles's menacing sneer about killing Beth's cat in part formed the basis for the state's threat charge, his effort to exclude the evidence as unfairly prejudicial is groundless. The district court did not abuse its discretion by admitting the evidence.

Affirmed.