AFTERMATH OF A SUICIDE

We publish in this issue two articles on suicide. "Aftermath of a Suicide" describes honestly and clearly the chaotic and ambivalent feelings of the surviving parent, and her struggles to help her children to cope. The often unhelpful responses of others, including professionals, made her task harder and she describes many of the problems for the children (school refusal, anti-social problems, jealousy and interference with new relationships) which research findings confirm. We are publishing her tale anonymously but would welcome correspondence which will be passed to the author.

On the same theme of suicide, we reprint an article by David Evans of the Samaritans on the imitative effect of suicide. At the 11th International Congress of Child Psychiatry and allied Professions which I attended in July in Paris, Gould and Shaffer reported on their study from New York of the variations in youth suicide and attempted suicide before and after the broadcast of four fictional television films which featured suicidal behaviour. The number of attempted suicides after the broadcasts went up by one third, and the completed suicides were also significantly in excess of those before the programmes were broadcast. The authors conclude that the results are consistent with imitation having caused the increase in suicide and attempted suicide. Whilst the script writers of popular 'soap' operas need to consider these findings, they are describing a reality, and it is for society to consider ways in which we might lessen the number of suicide attempts and suicides and ways we might help the families of those who succumb. We will write more on this in a future issue.

EDITOR

My husband died 12 years ago beneath the wheels of a train. We assumed it was suicide, but the coroner brought in a verdict of accidental death.

I believe he had a death wish. He had an illness as progressive and as terminal in its way as some forms of cancer. No one was able to give it a name—depression, that most fashionable of sicknesses, was suggested as a diagnosis. A psychiatrist said to me: 'Your husband is a very peculiar personality', and a general practitioner told me he was just anti-social! Since he was a gregarious and fun-loving man I felt that to be something of a travesty. After his death, a member of the medical profession said, 'He was almost psychopathic'. Whatever the reason, his moods altered him from a loving family man into a raging demon whose world had gone awry and had to be set straight again. These moods became progressively worse and more frequent, reaching a climax when my father, an anchor in his life, died very suddenly.

Life became unbearable for us both. There was endless talking which seemed to last for days and nights. Sometimes these were talks to sort through his perceived problems, or to try to allay a violent bout, and those that occurred after such a bout. We both had responsible jobs, and in retrospect I do not know how either of us held onto them! I do not believe anyone knew the extent of his illness. We strove to keep our daughters from physical and mental harm, and in his rational periods he knew what he was doing to us all—thus I say that he died because he loved us.

AMBIVALENCE

With his death one nightmare ended and another began. There were many issues to be faced, not the least my own ambivalent feelings. I had so many times prayed that when he left the house he would not come back. Now I experienced feelings of remorse, anger, relief, guilt, overwhelming sorrow, and, above all, despair. I found I was quite unable to recall the happy times, only the bad. My nightmares were horrendous, and only finally exorcised some years later at a Cruse counselling training session.

In common with most people after a death, I both saw and heard my husband. When I saw him I felt cold fear, but when I heard him I felt comforted. The vision no doubt represented the remembered reality, whilst the voice was the source of comfort I wanted him to become.

NADIR

My daughters kept me sane, and drove me frantic! I got angry with them, I ran away from them and from my other responsibilities. I took long weekends away, expensive holidays; I filled my wardrobe with expensive clothes, took a lover, and I enacted dreadful scences of anguished pathos. During one such drama I ran through the village in my nightdress and flung myself at a passing hedge. I have no recollection of what triggered this melodramatic performance.

Predictably my problems were inhibiting my efficiency in my work, and I was fortunate in finding a residential post. I had a satisfying job there and the space to work through my grief, knowing that the girls were safe. While there, however, I sank to the absolute nadir, feeling that I was a dreadful mother and the children would fare better with my mother. I frequently took my youngest daughter to school and quite forgot to collect her.

The overdose I took followed a period of great anger and bitterness. The anger was directed at a god who could allow this to happen to me. I was beginning to realise that I was never going to know my husband's love again. I had been searching for love and for recognition of myself as a woman through a very promiscuous stage. But it is from this event that I feel I can chart my recovery.

I awoke in hospital to find a doctor friend at my bedside—the look on his face spoke more deeply than his words which were, simply: 'Why didn't you phone?'

As a result of this escapade I was referred to a psychiatrist who, very sensibly, said: 'You know what is wrong with you. I know what is wrong with you. Now go away and cure yourself.' It was, I suppose, the 'permission' I needed. And it worked.

It is now nearly 13 years ago. I see myself as normal again, although there is still residual anger in me which I regard as a positive charge: the motivating force. Being widowed earns the sympathy of society which divorce does not—it is respectable. I do fear the prospect of remarriage, however. I like to be in control now!

MY CHILDREN

That was me—the selfish side of grief. But it is a fraction of the whole. Part of that whole are my daughters who have grown into two delightful young ladies of just 16 and nearly 19, despite me. I like to think they can cock a snoop at **some** of the theories propounded by some members of the psychiatric profession.

I realise the inherent dangers in loss and in unresolved grief—but many do survive the experience and never have to resort to the professionals. Within about 12 months my daughters, then aged three and six, experienced four losses, each one someone close to them. First their grandfather,

then their father, their great grandmother and their great grandfather. The latter died when we were all on holiday and he was with us. The holiday bungalow was full of family and friends. He died a peaceful and natural death amongst us all, and perhaps that gave them a different perspective on death—they witnessed it, along with all those they also loved.

Since my husband was cremated and then interred, I expected comments and questions from the girls. None came. They did not seem in the least surprised that their Daddy was in such a tiny box. I had dreaded explaining that he had been burnt. After the funeral my younger daughter provided light entertainment by changing her smart dress for a pair of thick woollen tights, gabardine trousers and a lurid pink sweater—all this on a sweltering July day! And I had been trying to show everyone how well I was coping. This has continued to be an overwhelming force. Anything that bodes criticism of the way in which I am bringing up my children brings out the she-bitch in me at once!

ANXIETIES

They each expressed their grief in different ways—I cannot remember now exactly how we coped. We did talk a great deal, and still do. My six year old said: 'I loved Daddy, but didn't like it when he made you cry'. I tried to explain that he was sick and really did not mean to make me cry. I have always stressed the fact that he loved us all. My three year old released her feelings in her dreams and she said: 'Mummy, was it like my dolls when they are broken?'—to which I could only reply yes. She also had a quite understandable fear that each time I left the house, especially if I went out in the evening, I would not come back. Even going to bed knowing I was not going out, elicited the question 'Mummy, you **will** still be here in the morning, won't you?' Only experience and frequent reassurance allayed this fear.

My elder daughter and I used to shout at each other—indeed we still do! She would say: 'Mummy, I don't mind you getting angry, but I do wish you would stop throwing things, it does get so expensive.' Before their father died she had shown some anxiety by self-inflicted scratch marks—quite symmetrical, on face, arms, bottom and legs. This got far worse after his death, and only lessened when the tensions within her eased. She sucked her thumb—still does sometimes when she is very tired, but she does not know that I know! Bribery and persuasion stopped that habit, although she swears she never received the bribe. For a while she would hold her urine until she overflowed. The result was a damp, smelly young lady. This too we talked about until she was finally persuaded out of the habit. Her powers of concentration and learning deserted her. In my distress I overlooked this, and her teacher did not push her either. She would flutter her not-inconsiderable eyeleshes and say 'My Daddy is dead', and everyone went weak-kneed and let her off!

Later she and I went through a somewhat testing time when we had the most dreadful slanging matches. This was when she was about 10. At last I realised the only way to deal with them was to walk away from them, and they eventually ceased.

Her attachment to me and to her home I feel is a trifle worrying—as much as it is also flattering. She has always been jealous of any man friend I might have. I have said that, although I understand perfectly, I am not prepared to sacrifice my happiness, for then I would resent her. Recently she had a brief and very intense love affair which was rather doomed to failure from the start. She has reacted to that like a telescoped bereavement process—which, after all, it is. She has always had great insight into her own emotions. After this episode she said to me 'All the men to whom I have been closest have left me'.

A TESTING TIME

When they were small I resented the children and the ties they placed upon me. I wanted to sit down and just be sorry for myself. Instead I had to rouse myself and feed and dress them. I had to love them and respond to them. At first I gave in to them, and reaped the results later when I had to be strict and administer some order and discipline. They bickered—oh, how they bickered! I comforted myself with Dr. Spock, who told me they would never be squashed at school. My younger daughter has borne that out: through a career of trials and tribulations no one has ever squashed her. She has had her troubles, including a short spell of school refusal. She went on a shop lifting spree with another girl and bore the secret for a year. During that time her behaviour deteriorated. At last the story poured out, but by that time the guilt she felt was immense. I did approach an educational psychologist, who is also an adviser to our local Cruse group. But we never had to avail ourselves of his offered help since, by talking and going over things with me, she worked her way through it, long and laboriously. The first step was to face each shopkeeper, to both purge her guilt and to allow her to cross their thresholds and not face a nightmare each time she did so. I rang them first, she bore it all with fortitude, and each of them was firm but kind. I was very grateful to them indeed. At school she was always privately afraid she would not be able to do things, so she became the 'attention-seeker'. She was often in detention and she suffered a great lack of self-confidence. We worked so hard at this problem that it is now conspicuously absent: her self-confidence knows no bounds. A young drug using friend of hers said to her: 'You are lucky, you don't have to go with the crowd'. I thank God for it.

RELATIONSHIPS

Both girls tried the manipulative approach when I was cross. 'I wish Daddy was here . . .' I had to say, 'And if he was he would be even crosser than I am'. I knew that whatever impression I gave them of their father would probably form the basis of their future expectation of men. Despite what they knew of his illness I could not allow them to grow up thinking him either a saint or a sinner—they should not be allowed to idealise his memory. With no pattern at home i hope they have seen the spectrum of married life from my brother and sister-in-law who both love and fight openly, and with equal ease!

There have been some awkward times. I found the girls' puberty hard to deal with, and for reasons I do not fully understand. Envy? Developing sexuality? Possibly both. My aspirations for them have been concerned with their relationships with others, I think, and their feelings for themselves. One must learn to love oneself before one can love others. I hoped they would be able to include both men and women in their circle of friends, on an equal footing, and to this end we have had lodgers from the theatre, we have a wide circle of friends. The girls always eat with me at any supper party I give. One can become very isolated, so the wider the band of people they meet

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CONFRONTATION IN BER



By Philip Millington, PhD, FRMS, Lecturer in Bio-Engineering at Strathclyde University.
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INTRODUCTION

Although helpers may have received lengthy training in counselling, have read many books and have years of experience, they frequently report that nothing happens when they try to counsel a person. Under supervision, each counsellor will report a good, firm relationship with the client, endless history and considerable understanding of the client's problems. What is missing is often the ability to lead the client towards decisions that are helpful. This is the process in counselling called CONFRONTATION.

Aftermath of a Suicide continued

the better. A social life won't come to you—the world and society owes you nothing.

I am aware that I have left immense gaps in this account, and one in particular—the tremendous support of my mother and other friends. One of my greatest assets was a happy childhood.

* * *

Younger daughter, aged 16:

When my father died, we moved house. I think the earliest memory of that time is sitting on the stairs of that house with my mother; and my sister and I were crying because we did not want to leave that house. I do not remember thinking that my father had died, just the horror of having to leave our lovely cottage.

My next memories are those of waiting alone, outside the school gates after all the other children had gone home, waiting and wondering when Mummy would arrive to take me home.

I also remember playing on my grief—it was an excuse to gain sympathy and attention. I used to make up stories to my friends about how Mummy and Daddy had a big argument, and Daddy had left in a great temper. I remember one particular occasion when I made a huge affair with my closest friend, about how I thought my Mummy and Daddy were divorced before he died—that was total rubbish, but it gained my friend's sympathy and attention.

I cannot say that I have missed having a father, because I have not ever truly known life with a father. I do, though, sometimes wish that I had him here to be my friend. About a year ago I was upset over something and I wanted so much for him to come down from wherever he is, and to hold me. I remember thinking: 'Now, in all the films he'd descend from above in a silver cloud, but is he? No!'

My sister, Mummy and I are all close, and we know that we are never alone—we have the support of others there if we need it—and of course, the love. We are very much a family, and just as happy as any family with two parents. Indeed I often think we are a lot happier and have a lot fewer problems than some families with both parents.

* * *

Older daughter, aged 18:

I feel it is important to let people know that my father is dead rather than let them think my parents are divorced because I never mention the presence of a father. It has made me very protective over my mother in many varying situations, and I become aggressive whenever I feel she is threatened—by either men or women. Although I am not anti-men, I have been jealous of Mummy's lovers since I was so used to having **all** her attention. Not now; a sign of my maturing, I suppose.

At times I had bad dreams and dreamt that Daddy had come back, but he was completely normal in appearance. It was, however, awful, since I thought I had come to terms with his death but now assume it to have been a sign that I hadn't. I now would find it hard to accept a father-figure in the house—a lover, yes, but not a substitute father. But nevertheless, when I am with friends who have happy close families I do miss all the things that having a father seems to mean, and then I realise that I miss him.

Difficulties with confrontation usually begin with the counsellor. The word itself often inspires fear. Everyone has seen or experienced the devastation inflicted by irresponsible personal assault. Until confidence can be found, the caring helper will withdraw from being involved in a process that can hurt. After all, isn't the bereaved person, my client, suffering enough?

In fact, confrontation enables the client to move on from stalemate or block to active consideration of change. Change is not some thing to be feared. We are all changing. Life is a process of change. When I cease to change, I am dead. Effective counselling is concerned with change. Once the need for change has been accepted then decisions can be taken. Indeed, confrontation may be regarded as the pivotal skill in all forms of counselling.

Caricatures of confrontation are best seen as ineffective confrontation, such as commanding, admonishing, threatening, exhorting, preaching, moralising, advising, offering solutions, lecturing, giving logical arguments, judging, criticising and blaming. Real confrontation is a process in which the client is either helped to identify strengths, to face the reality of those strengths and then to go on to make decisions about their further development, or helped to identify and face a weakness in her behaviour in a way that makes a demand for change that is implicit but not authoritative.

WHEN AND WHERE TO CONFRONT

Confrontation should be offered whenever a topic in a story is returned to repeatedly or when a "hole" in a story is suspected, (an example, part case history, is given