threatened. And what will other people think of us?

How does this problem show itself? Jane is a mother of three and has a job. She escaped with her life from the Bradford stadium fire disaster. Two years later, her doctor persuaded her to see a counsellor. In spite of the all too obvious distress in her every word and gesture, she was at pains to point out that she had never asked for help in her life. Her family, friends and colleagues saw her as a "coper". She was the one that everyone came to when they needed a sympathetic ear. Her family needed her, so she could not "fall apart". However, her general practitioner knew she was heading for a psychiatric emergency.

The initial experience of receiving help was for this woman as bad as the problem itself. She could not allow herself to be vulnerable. She held on to her image as a coper until finally she let go. Jane had to learn how to be helped.

There were others, like Tom. He was a marathon runner. Two years after the Bradford fire, which he witnessed from the opposite side of the ground, he lived in dread of having a heart attack. He cried at the sight of his children at play. One day a friendly workmate told him to get some help. He did, but it had to be a secret. He was desperately worried about what people would think if they found out. His family still don't know.

People are wary of help, but especially of institutional help. It smacks of "the welfare". The welfare has a powerful potency about it. We shun it because it is associated with unpleasant things like child abuse, madness, death, poverty, juvenile delinquency and other reasons for being put away. Jane and Tom both feared they were on the edge of madness, but they would not approach any of the helping agencies. They were places which had about them an air of menacing authority and mysterious power.

People are also wary of helpers. Their fantasy, all too often correct, is that helpers operate on a higher level of experience and understanding than themselves. They "analyse" and use big words. Those in need sometimes worry that once they get into a counselling relationship they will never be able to get out of it. Because they know so little about the sorts of people counsellors actually are, they invest remarkable power in their image of them.

Those who help, both paid and voluntary, can approach this difficult problem in a practical and commonsense way. A barrier of sorts does exist between givers and receivers of help. Those who receive are genuinely afraid that their problem will be misunderstood, or that they will be patronised, or that there is some stigma attached (and let's face it, in many cases there is!). Those who give help are often frightened of failing; they may not be facing up to their own problems in life; in a minority of instances the right motivation for helping others may not be present at all. Whatever the reasons, the net result is that givers and receivers do not seem to be able to identify with each other.

The beginning of a solution is to recognise that we are all in the same boat, that all of us are vulnerable, that all of us need help at times in our lives. None of us are above human frailty. To the extent that we are all in the same boat, the helping relationship ought to reflect the quality and simplicity of our everyday relationships. Are we not all made of the same sensitive flesh and blood and do we not all hurt when we are wounded by the jealous pride and blind ambition of others? When it comes to entrusting ourselves into the safe keeping of a counsellor, do we not all have the deepest sensitivity about not being heard, about being put down, and most of all, about somehow ending up feeling diminished within by the experience of opening up?

Those we counsel are no different from ourselves. If we are able to act on this, the barrier dissolves on our side. It is simple. But it is not easy. You see, some people like barriers. Do you? Can you share your vulnerable self?

● *Michael Stewart has recently founded Stewart Associates, which he describes as "a group of professionals and lay survivors whose objective is to provide training and advice to those who counsel the bereaved, their managers and their organisations. They are uniquely experienced in the field of disaster after-care and combine in-depth professional knowledge with awareness of consumer needs. After Bradford, Zeebrugge and Hungerford they are now used by, a variety of groups and organisations at home and abroad". Address for contact is: 25 Harper Grove, Sutton-in-Craven, Skipton, North Yorkshire BD20 7JN, tel: 0535 35446.*

COPING WITH GRIEF

A Residential Conference

to be held at

FITZWILIAM COLLEGE
CAMBRIDGE

12th—15th SEPTEMBER

Speakers include Derek Nuttall, Peter Kaye, Terry Lear, Elizabeth Grayson, Tony Roberts.

Fee £150

Details from The Revd. L. Turner, General Hospital, Northampton.
Organised by GAP.

Forthcoming Courses and Conferences

BEREAVEMENT—THE ULTIMATE CHALLENGE. One-day Conference 11th October 1988. Queen Mother Conference Centre, Edinburgh. Subjects include Patterns of Grief, The Death of a Child, Planning Bereavement Support, Grief in Professional Carers and The Role of the Clergy. Speakers include Dr. Derek Doyle and Mr. Derek Nuttall. Organised by Cruse/St. Columba's Hospice. Fee £15 (Section 63 approved). Application forms and further details from Mrs. Ruth Hampton, Scottish Development Officer, Cruse, 138 McDonald Road, Edinburgh EH7 4NL. Tel: 031-556 4489.

GAY BEREAVEMENT PROJECT. One-Day Training Seminar. 17th September, 1988. Essex Hall, London. The seminar is designed to give bereavement counsellors, befrienders and others with experience or training in bereavement care, an insight into the special problems which lesbians and gay men meet on the death of a life-partner. Fee £10. Applications to Gay Bereavement Project, Unitarian Rooms, Hoop Lane, London NW11 8BS, marking envelope 'Seminar'.

PROFESSIONAL COURSE IN BEREAVEMENT COUNSELLING SKILLS. Ten Thursdays, 29th-September - 8th December, 1988, 5.30-9 p.m. The Hale Clinic, 7 Park Crescent, London, W.1. Directed by Dr Lyn Franchino. Lectures, videos and small group-work. Applications by 31st July to Nick Tyndall, Training Officer, Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR, Tel. 01-940 4818.

UNDERSTANDING THE MANAGEMENT OF PERINATAL BEREAVEMENT. 9th November - 14th December, 1988. Tavistock Clinic, London, Wednesdays, 2-4.45 p.m. Organising tutors: Dr S. Bourne and Dr E. Lewis, Consultants to the Perinatal Bereavement Unit. Open to all professions coping with perinatal bereavement and its psychological sequelae. Fee: £55. Application forms available from The Training Administrator, The Tavistock Clinic, 120 Belsize Lane, London NW3 5BA.