EDITORIAL

Two accounts (the first of which we publish anonymously) of the effects of losses of different kinds, are vivid personal testimonies to the enduring and profound effects of grief on human functioning. The widowed mother's suffering which led to depressive illness so severe that admission to mental hospital was needed, led also to losses for her infant daughter, the effects of which may not yet be fully manifested. The author pays tribute to the excellent care she received in hospital from nurses and doctors, but less thought appears to have been given by the mother's professional carers to how the baby's losses could be minimised and her mental health safeguarded. The account by an Irish university lecturer of the loss of her baby through her decision to have her new-born daughter placed for adoption tells us poignantly of the continuing pain of such a decision, and has much to teach those who are involved in organising and providing post-adoption counselling services.

Berry's account of how the parents helped the children through the illness and death of their infant brother is a good example of preventative work with children, and we reprint it here as an example of what parents can do to help their children even when they themselves are grief-stricken.

The papers by Blackburn and Lecky are good examples of small research studies designed to further our understanding of teachers' attitudes to bereavement, bereaved children and death education respectively. We publish them to encourage teachers to feel more confident in approaching the subject of death with their pupils and to encourage others to embark on circumscribed, manageable studies which give us useful information. Often our readers tell us that they switch off at the mention of the word 'research' and we hope that these studies will demonstrate that research can be useful and accessible to those who care for bereaved children.

Depressive Illness after Bereavement: a personal account

Whenever I read someone's personal account of their experience of bereavement, I am amazed and impressed by the clarity with which they seem able to recall events and, more particularly, their progress through the various stages of grief.

It was not like that at all for me. At best I can only recall a jumbled mass of feelings and events, which seemed at the time hardly to belong to me at all. I used to read books about grief, in the hope of understanding what was happening to me, but I couldn't identify with them. I used to think: 'There must be something wrong with me. I haven't experienced any of this.' Now, five years later, I still haven't experienced any outgoing anger, any upset, nor indeed the letting go and acceptance of the continuation of my new life. I did, however, experience an inner turmoil which was so overwhelming, so threatening and so totally confusing, that I was incapable of dealing with it other than by pushing it away and denying any real feeling at all. I was unable to share any of it, for fear of losing control completely.

Immediately after the death

I remember in detail events that occurred during the 48 hours preceding my husband's untimely death as if it were only yesterday, but, by contrast, I have mostly only vague memories, shrouded in fog, of events following his death. However, I can recall certain things very vividly. Three police officers brought the news that my husband had committed suicide by throwing himself 80ft from the top floor of the Polytechnic where he was a lecturer. It was during the lunch hour, when the campus was always very busy. I can remember feeling sorry for the students who unfortunately had to witness such a dreadful thing.

The police sergeant commented that I didn't seem surprised or shocked at the news. Surprised I was not, for I had been feeling very uneasy and restless for 48 hours, with an unspoken, vague, helpless knowledge of something dreadful being about to happen to my husband. Shocked I certainly was, so much so that I felt stunned by a terrible blow deep down inside myself, whilst remaining terribly calm on the outside. I desperately needed to hold my 18-month-old daughter, who equally desperately wanted to come to me, to be cuddled and made to feel safe from these strange visitors, but the young policewoman, lacking the wisdom of motherhood, thought she was being helpful by keeping her away from me. I was unable to communicate any of what I was feeling though, so I just allowed her to continue to battle against my strong-willed, unhappy toddler.

The next thing I remember with clarity is the arrival of my parents that same afternoon. My mother came in, shaking more than ever from her Parkinson's disease. She put her arm around me, but withdrew it quickly because it made us both feel so uncomfortable: I had never turned to her for comfort, physical or otherwise, for she was unable to provide it. She cried and I immediately reacted in the familiar way that I had known since childhood, by controlling my own feelings of unhappiness in order to be able to comfort and placate her. My father made an awkward attempt at words of comfort, but we had not communicated for so long that it was pointless. Any attempt by him at closeness would have been completely out of place. I did not look to him for comfort—I had given up trying long ago. Therefore, I was relieved to find him quickly heading towards Katie, and concentrating on the one small person to whom he could relate without too much difficulty.

Somehow my parents came and went and Ian's parents arrived. I don't remember much about that, except that I was relieved to see his mother. His father, however, was frequently very tearful; he had had a stroke only two days before Ian's death and it was all too much for him. I couldn't cope with seeing him so upset and my own feelings became even more deeply internalised and well hidden away as a result. At some point he must have taken two photos of Katie at that time. I was not aware of her, but I hate those photos. If anyone is in any doubt about the fact that children, even young children, grieve, they should see the photographs of my daughter in a state of utter misery and confusion!

By the time I was allowed to go and see Ian at the funeral parlour he had been so well 'put together'