

Is This Person Suffering Grief or Trauma or Traumatic Grief?

Annie Cantwell-Bartl

Traumatic Grief is a new concept emerging in the field of bereavement and trauma. Over the years there has been extensive literature on loss and bereavement. The literature of trauma and its impact is still new. As with bereavement, where there has been an emphasis on a person suffering from trauma, it has usually been viewed as a single entity. It is only recently that there is more formally acknowledgement that a person may be struggling with the joint manifestations of both grief and trauma.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TRAUMA AND GRIEF?

It is important to understand the symptoms of grief and trauma as separate entities and then to consider that a person may manifest both sets of symptoms.

GRIEF?

Grief, in this context, is defined as a primarily emotional reaction to the loss of a loved one through death. It incorporates diverse psychological (cognitive, social-behavioural) and physical (physiological-somatic) manifestations (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). The bereaved person will experience separation distress, which is a normal grief response. They are preoccupied with the person who has died, seek reminders of them and are aroused and continually focused on the dead person.

TRAUMA?

Trauma is defined as any event that is outside of the usual realm of human experience that is markedly distressing

e.g. evokes reactions of intense fear, helplessness and horror. Such traumatic stressors usually involve the perceived threat to one's physical integrity or to the physical integrity of someone in close proximity (Mitchell & Everly, 2001). In contrast to a grief response the traumatized person is preoccupied with the scene of the trauma and the violent encounter of death, or an experience that could have resulted in death. They wish to avoid reminders of the event; they are hyper-vigilantly aroused and orientated to threat, danger, or the return of a similar threat. There is a great deal of anxiety and the world seems an unsafe place.

WHAT IS TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

Traumatic Grief is defined as a concept where a person suffers from grief as a result of a death and also from traumatic distress (Jacobs, 1999). If people are grieving and experiencing separation anxiety the symptoms will consist of yearning, searching and loneliness. When there is concurrent traumatic distress the person will also be experiencing numbness, disbelief, distrust, anger and a sense of futility about the future. *Traumatic Grief* captures both dimensions of a person's response.

CRITERIA FOR TRAUMATIC GRIEF AS PROPOSED BY TRAUMA SPECIALISTS (JACOBS, 1999)

- A. First, a person has to be exposed to an event or events that they regard as horrifying. The response involves intrusive, distressing preoccupation with the person who has died (yearning, longing or searching).
- B. In response to the death the following symptoms are present:
 - Frequent attempts to avoid reminders of what has happened.
 - Feeling of purposelessness and a sense of futility about the future.

Subjective sense of numbness, detachment or an absence of an emotional response.

- Feeling stunned, dazed or shocked.
- Difficulty acknowledging the death.
- Feeling that life is empty or meaningless.
- Difficulty imagining a fulfilling life.
- Feeling that part of oneself has died.
- Shattered world view (e.g. a lost sense of security, trust or control).
- Assumes symptoms of harmful behaviours of, related to, the deceased person

- Excessive irritability, bitterness, or anger.

C. The duration of the disturbance or the symptoms is at least two months.

D. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

SOME FURTHER POINTS OF CLARIFICATION (JACOBS, 1999)

- Other losses may seem traumatic but do not qualify under this classification e.g. a loss of a job does not fit into the category of *traumatic grief*.

- The symptoms of *traumatic grief* may result from a sudden, violent or unexpected death but the death may not have been objectively traumatic in order to make the diagnosis (Horowitz, Siegel, Holen, Bonnano, Milbrath & Stinson, 1997).

- Symptoms of *traumatic grief* may follow any death that is personally devastating, e.g. where a bereaved person had a close and confiding relationship (this comes from the particular relationship with the deceased person and other personal vulnerability factors).

- As distinct from normal grief the separation anxiety persists at a marked level of intensity, remains intrusive and distressing, and along with other symptoms, interferes with social, occupational and other important areas of functioning.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONSIDER THAT PEOPLE MAY BE SUFFERING TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

There is a need to consider the impact of both grief and trauma on people. This is important because if people are suffering from both, their grief is more complicated and a failure to recognize traumatic grief may result in inadequate support and care.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL PREDICTORS FOR TRAUMATIC GRIEF?

There are a number of predictors for *traumatic grief*. Some possible ones are:

- Sudden unexpected death or even unexpected death in terminal illness.

- Violent death: suicide, sudden accidents and vehicle accidents.

- The death of a child, a family member or someone very close to the mourner (Rando, 1999).

- A mourner's psychological predisposition to trauma: e.g. when a mourner is very dependant on the person who has died.

SOME GENERAL POINTS TO KEEP IN MIND IN ASSISTING A TRAUMATIZED PERSON

- Be aware of the significance of emergency mental health intervention, as practiced by the model, Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) and its parallel traumatic "stress defusing" (Mitchell, 2001), where appropriate.

- People first need basic practical help. The effected person will be emotionally raw and overwhelmed with what to do next. It is likely that there will be many things to do and people traumatized may not have the initial resources to consider their own emotional requirements.

- When a distressed person has time,

remember the importance of attentive listening and spending time with them. Never under-estimate the value of empathy and compassion.

- The person and the family may require some education about the impact of traumatic death. Don't rush to intervene and be careful about strategies too early.
- Keep in mind the vulnerability of the effected person.
- Most people will recover and will not need professional help but helpers need to recognize their limitations if someone needs further assistance.
- Remember self-care yourself! Don't under-estimate your own vulnerability to vicarious trauma or the impact on your family if you are traumatized which can result in secondary trauma (Catharall, 1992).

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