

What might the secondary problems caused by fathers heavy drinking?

The mother sings "I want to hold on to my hate and one day I will kill the killer of my son".

Often people experience murderous impulses and can feel quite embarrassed and guilty about this. Hate and righteous indignation are useful mental mechanisms. These are seen to a lesser extent in every day life. It can be difficult to acknowledge angry feelings and this can vary from culture to culture. Many societies for example actively encourage and condone the visible outpouring of anger and emotion.

"I thought it would pass by now" is a lament sung by the father. There is no doubt that this 'middle stage' of bereavement can go on for an unbearably long time. It can be quite a risky period for suicide. There is considerable evidence to support the potent impact of bereavement as a life event that can precipitate a range of physical and psychiatric illnesses.

Thus, the pain and anger stage of bereavement will affect the family members in different ways depending on where they are in the life circle, aspects of their personality and possibly their own earlier experiences.

Resolution

In the programme by implication a substantial period of time has passed. In reality it is likely to be two years before it is appropriate to talk about resolution although during preceding time emotional reactions will have waxed and waned. Anniversaries for example may be the signal for resurgence of anger although as the years pass can also become a marker for increased equilibrium and a greater accommodation to the loss.

Part of the process is an acknowledgement that a life is over and that it is right to be sad. Those with a religious faith can derive great comfort from it, although of course earlier on this can be the focus of anger and hostility. Individuals can feel abandoned and that in some way this loss is a test of faith. There is no doubt that many can derive great long-term support from the belief in a good afterlife.

Self evidently bereavement will put stress on any relationship. If a couple can progress at roughly the same pace there is the opportunity to derive mutual support and benefit. Important dates in the calendar would not need an explanation. Many couples do say their relationship has been made stronger by adversity although it is also true to say that some come unstuck.

The programme has shown what some might consider an idealised and possibly romanticised conclusion. Real life can be a bit different.

Summary

This programme has highlighted the normal process of bereavement. There is an initial period of denial that will last for a varying time, possibly days, followed by a period of anger and fury measured in months and finally a gradual process of resolution which is a continuing process measured in years.

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ROUGH TIMES

A MUSICAL ABOUT BEREAVEMENT



Introduction

These notes accompany the teaching programme called 'Rough Times'. It has been designed to achieve a number of objectives.

- Introduce the normal reactions of bereavement.
- Produce a stimulating and novel lecture aid.
- Provide a programme that is sufficiently self-contained to be useful to the individual student.

If you are the lecturer now is probably the right time to at least have a quick look at the DVD.

The first five minutes or so will give you the general flavour and see the production style. It has been made for a professional audience who are new to the field and this is likely to include healthcare students across a wide range of specialities.

The hope is that it will make a lasting impression on the audience and provides focus for the rest of the lecture.

Content

This programme portrays an archetypal family of mother, father and three children. We see the children squabbling although their parents are quite relaxed about this. They appear to have a stable, loving, long-term caring relationship.

Is this normal? How do siblings get on with each other?

Obviously many people have different experience of family life and it raises the question as to what influence this would have on the ability to cope with bereavement. There are also important cultural differences. It is quite likely that the audience will have strong personal views as to what a 'normal' family life is. Notwithstanding any cultural and national differences, bereavement is a universal experience. The sudden and unexpected death of a child is a special bereavement. It is not in the natural order of life.

Does the cause of death have an impact on surviving members of the family?

What would be the difference between loss from muscular dystrophy, meningitis and death from a drink driver?

Denial

However the news is broken individuals find it impossible to assimilate it all at once. Under these circumstances the mental mechanism of denial comes in to place. This is quite a 'primitive' and fragile mental mechanism that is employed early on. The belief is that the dead person is simply in the next room and will soon appear. To some extent the family will carry on emotionally as though nothing has happened. From time to time they are forced to confront reality.

The scene portrays the father leaving for work and automatically assumes that he is taking his son to school on the way. People can switch denial on and off. The process can last for a varying period of time. Depending on circumstances, a day or so to two weeks can be within the normal range. Possibly for many weeks and months afterwards denial can cut in again for periods of time.

Denial is not an unreasonable approach and should be thought of as pathological unless it becomes an exclusive way of coping with the bereavement. As a result of denial there are occasions that people appear to experience auditory hallucinations – they think they can hear the person's voice for example, or appear deluded and are 'certain' that Johnny will come home from school today. These profound disturbances should not be confused with a mental illness.

Who is most likely to confront reality first and why?

Clearly, there is no right answer to this question.

People often talk about feeling 'shell-shocked' and the next scene portrays the family in a state of shock and bewilderment.

What sort of thoughts would the parents be having about their dead child and how might this differ from the experiences of the siblings?

Would the parents idealise the dead child? What affect would sibling rivalry have on the bereavement process?

Pain and Anger

The psychological processes move on in that the denial mechanism gradually becomes less prominent. For increasing periods of time the individual really begins to feel the loss and appreciate the implications. This stage can manifest in varying ways depending on the personality and also to some extent depending on the circumstances of the death. Those of a more introspective nature will internalise the loss and talk of much pain, whereas for others the feelings will be more of anger and fury.

Many individuals who get stuck in the middle of this stage are only too well aware of the way they have changed (for the worse as they see it). The younger sister knows her brother is dead and longs to have him beside her still. Thus, she is coping with this middle stage with a different emphasis. She is also beginning to feel the burden of having to 'be him'.

However, she is feeling wretched and her relative immaturity does not allow her to see into the future when things may be better and she expresses very powerful wishes to be with him.

For the eldest daughter who is on the threshold of leaving home, life is far from easy. On the one hand she is forced into taking on an adult and responsible role within the family which, for the time being at least, her parents have abandoned but she herself is so clearly lacking. Her boyfriend is doing what he can but her grief is having an impact on their relationship at what may be a critical stage. The relationship may come to grief.

The programme displays pain at first and the influence this has on the parent's relationship "*don't offer me bottled comfort, that won't bring me back my boy*". Here the mother is talking about how it really does feel to appreciate what is happening.

Her husband on the other hand has found the pain unbearable and turned to a bottle of whiskey a day. This has the potential of causing considerable secondary difficulties.