

Those of us who work with bereaved people soon become aware of their amazing capacity to survive and grow in the face of adversity. Loss can force us to become aware of strengths and potentialities that we would never otherwise have discovered.

The counsellor may witness and act as midwife to such transformations but the transition is not easy and not every bereaved person will grow through grieving. Some withdraw into any place of safety, others go on as if nothing had happened and refuse stubbornly to change at all.

We must recognise and respect their fear without sharing it. Rather than pity for their weakness, it is our faith in their strength that will get them through. Wise counsellors do not over-protect their clients, nor do they take over their lives and instruct them what to do. Our role is to provide a safe place and a secure relationship from which they can test out their thoughts and plans; not in order to begin again, but to build upon the foundations that have already been laid. It is often necessary to lose someone in order to become aware of the gifts that they have left behind.

Inevitably many of our articles focus on the difficulties that arise in bereavement, but we also welcome papers which reveal the opportunities for maturation that may result and the contribution counsellors can make to facilitate the journey through grief.

Colin Murray Parkes, UK

Sexual needs of those whose partner has died



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'We are never so defenceless against suffering as when we love, never so helplessly unhappy as when we have lost our loved object or its love'¹. If bereavement is accompanied by

changes in feelings, it is reasonable to assume that these changes should include sexual feelings and behaviour. This exploration looks at patterns of bereavement and sexual behaviour in women and in men, including sexual/intimacy differences, and tries to highlight some issues for the therapeutic relationship.

METHODOLOGY

Searching the literature, correlating bereavement and sexual arousal, showed that very little material existed except in connection with HIV/AIDS. Personal communications with Martin Cole and Colin Murray Parkes provided more information and support, for which I am grateful.

To supplement these sources, I decided to do some case study research. Finding respondents was very difficult, and approaches to organisations working with bereaved people were rejected by their ethics committees. The inference is that in dealing with the double taboo of death and sex, 'hard' research evidence is difficult to find. Eventually I did find eight people (see Table) who were interviewed, each for one hour, using a detailed questionnaire.

Qualitative research in any area of personal experience of painful events suffers from the ethical dilemma that respondents may find areas of past pain resurfacing, and so need time to talk through material other than that directly relevant to the researcher's brief. With this awareness, time was offered immediately after the questions had been discussed, and later by telephone contact, should the participant request it.

Bowlby² in his writing on attach-

EDITOR'S NOTE

While sex is often a problem after bereavement there have been few attempts to study the subject in a systematic manner. In this paper, Brenda Elliott reports her findings from a small but interesting survey which highlights some of the difficulties.

ment and loss suggests that we move through four main phases in bereavement: numbing; yearning and searching; disorganisation and despair; reorganisation. There is now wide acceptance of this process, with variation and particular application to individual situations. More recent research³, shows that men and women have some differences in their grieving patterns. Certainly there appear to be gender differences in the sexual responses and in the behavioural outcomes in my sample. As a couple, sexual feelings can be safely contained in that union, but a widow or widower may be 'floating unanchored and undefined'; 'the passionate early days of being in love are very similar to the passionate painful days of grief', Wallbank⁴.

WIDOWS

Sexuality after bereavement

Writing specifically on a woman's experience of grief, Kitzinger⁵ says that 'any strong emotional state affects