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EDITORIAL

Colin Murray Parkes

In recent months much has been written in the press about differences of opinion on the harm or benefits of stress, and on the value of counselling for people under stress. In some reports the impression is given that stress is beneficial and that counselling does more harm than good. Since bereavement is one of the major stresses, and bereavement counselling is a form of stress counselling, readers may wish to join the debate. Here I attempt to present the main issues as I see them*.

The term 'stress' has been used to include an enormous range of phenomena, from the witnessing of horrific events to experimental situations in which students are set insoluble problems to solve. The findings of a large number of studies across many species of animal can be summarised:

- At low to moderate levels of stress we become more alert, we respond more rapidly and our efficiency increases by comparison with our performance when the level of stress is low or absent. In this sense stress can be said to be beneficial rather than harmful.
- As the level of stress rises we reach a critical point beyond which our efficiency falls off very rapidly, our concentration, judgement and memory are impaired and we become distressed. In this circumstance stress becomes harmful rather than helpful.

This simple conclusion goes some way to explain why some research findings point to stress as helpful whereas others indicate that it can do harm. Of course, life is more complicated than this. Human beings are better able than other species to anticipate the point at which their critical limit of stress will be reached and to take action to avoid this, although the avoidance of stress may then create new problems.

Situations vary in their stressfulness. Thus, human beings seem to have evolved the capacity to cope well with physical dangers (the prevalence of mental illness often drops in times of war) but less well with some of the difficulties which attend modern living and for which we are not biologically programmed. Intelligence is a mixed blessing, ena-

bling us to cope better with some situations but drawing us into other, more complex, predicaments.

People vary in their vulnerability to stress. A situation which is a challenge and an opportunity to one person may be the last straw for another. Sadly the 'tough-minded' often find it hard to understand the needs of those who are more tender and may disparage those who seek counselling as 'wimps'. This may deter

the 'tough-minded' from seeking help for themselves when they most need it. Reaction to bereavement is also influenced by a variety of risk factors including the type of loss, personal vulnerability or insecurity and the social circumstances in which a death occurs. Children are particularly vulnerable to the loss of a parent and their need for counselling or other help should always be evaluated.

By and large it is not unreasonable to suppose that those who ask for help following a bereavement are likely to benefit from it. We are, after all, well able to assess our own levels of stress and to recognise the danger of exceeding our limits of tolerance. This said, there are some in desperate need who do not ask for help, either because they are too depressed or because they are ignorant or distrustful of the help available. In such cases a tactful offer of help may need to be initiated by others.

But there is no evidence that *all* bereaved people will benefit from counselling and research has shown no benefit to arise from the routine referral of people to counselling for no other reason than that they have suffered a bereavement. Such routine offers of help may cause family members and others to feel superfluous and to back off when they are most needed.

The general conclusion to be drawn from research to date is that to be of benefit counselling needs to be provided for the minority of people who are faced with extraordinary stress, who are especially vulnerable and/or see themselves as lacking support.

* For details of the relevant research see: Parkes CM. Bereavement: studies of grief in adult life, 3rd edn. London, UK: Routledge, Pelican Books, 1997.