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126 Sheen Road

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Telephone 020 8940 4818

Fax 020 8940 7638

Email

info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk

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# TRAUMA AND LOSS

Like the blind men who each tried to describe an elephant, psychologists tend to develop theories which are limited to their own special areas of research and to ignore the larger picture. This is nowhere more apparent than in the related fields of trauma (or stress) and loss (or grief). Thus we

have studies of traumatic stress which emphasise the importance of fear and its consequences while studies of loss tend to emphasise the importance of grief.

More recently there has been an increased recognition of the extent to which

both types of life event bring about a need for people to undertake a major revision of their basic assumptions about the world. This concept, which was first described in Parkes' article on 'Psycho-social transitions' in 1971<sup>1</sup>, has recently been further developed by Janoff-Bulman in her book *Shattered Assumptions*, published in 1996. She points out that it is not fear that makes traumatic events psychologically harmful, but the way they undermine our basic assumptions about the world as a safe, ordered, just, caring and, ultimately, meaningful place.

Those who aim to help bereaved people will be familiar with the feelings of insecurity, chaos, injustice, abandonment and loss of meaning

which follow traumatic bereavements. It is our role to help to provide a secure base and a trusting relationship in which people can be helped, little by little, to review their basic assumptions and to develop a new view of the world, one which may be less ideal than the opti-

mistic image that preceded it, but is nevertheless 'good enough'.

In this edition of *Bereavement Care* we include a paper by Gibson and Turnbull on the importance of early intervention after traumatic incidents

and an account by Bromberg of the Grief and Bereavement Centre in São Paulo, Brazil, where the majority of clients have suffered losses by violence. There are also reviews by Yule of *When a Community Weeps* edited by Zimmer and Williams, by Parkes of *Traumatic and Nontraumatic Loss and Bereavement* edited by Malkinson, Rubin and Eliezer, and by Newman of *The Traumatology of Grieving*, edited by Figley and the new edition of *When Father Kills Mother* by Harris-Hendriks, Black and Kaplan.

The editors welcome other contributions to our understanding of this important field.

1. Parkes C M. Psychosocial transitions: A field for study. *Social Science and Medicine* 1971; 5: 101-115.
2. Janoff-Bulman R. *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. New York: The Free Press, 1992.

## EDITORIAL

Colin Murray Parkes

**It is not fear that makes traumatic events psychologically harmful, but the way they undermine our basic assumptions about the world as a safe, ordered, just, caring and, ultimately, meaningful place**