

Searching the literature on bereavement – a brief guide



Colin Murray Parkes OBE MD DPM FRCPsych
Consultant Psychiatrist
St Christopher's and St Joseph's Hospices, London, UK

The first step for those who are contemplating doing research, or who want to find out what is already known about a particular problem or aspect of bereavement, should be a review of the existing literature. This can prove both fascinating and rewarding

but, with so much material on bereavement now available, it can also be a daunting task. This paper attempts to provide some guidance and encouragement for readers who would like to broaden their understanding of this key subject.

WHY BOTHER?

Bereavement is one of the most stressful experiences suffered by human beings. It has been shown to increase the risk of psychological and physical disorders, and even mortality. It is most important for us to find out all we can about it to help us to mitigate the suffering it causes.

Bereavement also happens to be an eminently suitable topic for research. It occurs at times and in places that are reliably documented. In recent years the methods for studying bereavement have proved their worth and we now have sophisticated questionnaires and other techniques by which many of its causes and consequences can be measured in ethically acceptable ways. Consequently our knowledge and understanding of the field is growing year by year.

This said, there is still a great deal to be done and a great need for more research. Theories abound and need testing, people of different social and cultural groups and with different types of bereavement need to be understood and different methods of individual and group intervention need evaluation.

WHERE TO START

In recent years the number of publications dealing with aspects of bereavement has grown enormously. Publications range from weighty tomes to brief reports of

research and we can easily become overwhelmed by the sheer volume of published material. The weight of published matter is not, of course, an indication of the amount of new learning and the reader will soon discover that most new publications do little more than rehash what others have written.

For this reason it is wise to discriminate and journals such as *Bereavement Care* publish critical reviews of books and articles in the field which should make the task easier. Recent books and articles regularly review earlier work and provide

EDITOR'S NOTE

Parkes, who has illuminated our understanding of bereavement, here gives us the benefit of his arduously acquired 'know how' to search the literature. His article is worth reading even if you don't want, yourself, to add to human knowledge, because knowing how people should go about the task of preparing themselves to carry out research will help you to judge the worth of any research papers you do read. Have they done an exhaustive search of the pertinent literature? Are their references relevant and up-to-date? It may be worth looking up one or two of the key references to check that they have drawn the correct inferences from them.

Are they asking questions worth asking and capable, giving the methods they use, of being answered? Finally, are their conclusions warranted by the findings they present?

reference lists and it is not usually difficult to spot the **key references** which crop up again and again. There are also a few **specialist libraries** which have good collections of books and articles in the field of bereavement and whose librarians are able to offer guidance. Two such libraries are at St Christopher's Hospice in London (denise@stchris.ftech.co.uk) and the Bereavement Collection of the Bob Shapell School of Social Work in Tel Aviv University, Israel (www.tau.ac.il/socialwork/).

JOURNAL ARTICLES

The starting points for most literature searches today are the **computerised databases** now held by most good libraries or available on the internet. The medical field is well covered by MedLine and the Cumulative Index To Nursing and Allied Health Literature (CINAHL), and the psychological and sociological by Psych-Lit. Searching under a topic such as 'bereavement' will soon enable you to obtain references to a large number of journal articles and to read and print out **abstracts** of them. If you want to read the journal you may have to order a copy by **inter-library loan** unless it is held in your library. Unfortunately none of the computerised databases go back more than five or so years and many of the pioneering papers were written before that time. Some of these were included in a **bibliography** compiled by Robert Fulton, *et al* (listed in the appendix). Also there are many significant papers not published in the peer-reviewed medical, psychological or sociological journals. Some worthwhile journals in our field are not currently included on any computerised database. (*Bereavement Care* is included in CINAHL and a new psychological database, e-psyche).

Specialist journals publish work in our field. The most relevant are:

- *Omega - the Journal of Death and Dying* which has been publishing well-researched work since 1970.
- *Death Studies* was originally the *Journal of Death Education* and is still at its best in that field. It publishes refereed papers on significant research, scholarship and practical approaches in bereavement and loss, grief therapy, death attitudes, suicide and death education.

• *Mortality* takes a broad academic stance and includes papers from sociology, history and the arts alongside more psycho-social topics.

• *Illness, Crisis & Loss* is, as the title implies, concerned with psycho-social and ethical issues accompanying life-threatening illness, traumatic crises, grief and loss.

• *Bereavement Care* is intended to enable non-professionals to broaden their knowledge and keep up with advances in the field. It avoids technical language and sophisticated statistics.

• *Grief Matters*, the latest newcomer, is similar to *Bereavement Care*.

Omega, Illness, Crisis and Loss and *Death Studies* are published in North America and many, but not all, of their papers stem from that continent; they tend to favour psychologically-oriented papers. *Mortality*, like *Bereavement Care*, is published in the UK and *Grief Matters* in Australia.

Most serious researchers will subscribe to one or more of these and they can often be found in the libraries of hospice and palliative care units. A search through the indexes of back numbers will reveal many important papers and point the way to others. Contact details are given in the appendix, with a listing of more journals on related subjects.

THE INTERNET

This is a useful source of information about books and services in our field. If you enter the word 'bereavement research' into a search engine such as Yahoo, Lycos or Northern Light you will find much too much information, but more refined searches can be carried out if you are interested in one aspect of the topic. A useful source of bibliographical information is the Bereavement Self-help Resources Guide (www.inforamp.net/~bfo/guide/d_1500.html). MedLine can be searched and abstracts copied free of charge (www.allhealth.com/sponsors/aol/cgi-bin/frame_medline.html)

If you know the name of the author or title of a book the most exhaustive list is the catalogue of the British Library (opac97.bl.uk/) which lists every book published in English. Booksellers such as Amazon (Amazon.com or amazon.co.uk) carry a wide range of current titles and a useful search facility to help you to find what you are looking for.

BOOKSHOPS

If you do not have access to the internet, you will find a complete list of books in print on microfiche at any good bookshop

but, again, you will need to know the name of the author or title of the book. **Larger bookshops** will probably have several shelves of books under 'thanatology' or 'counselling' but books on bereavement may appear under a variety of other categories.

Specialist bookshops carry a wide variety of books in our field, but they are few and can most easily be contacted over the internet. They include Compassion Books, the official book service of the Association for Death Education and Counselling (www.compassionbooks.com); Brough's Books (www.dropbears.com/b/broughsbooks/afterlife.htm); Therapeutic Resources (www.therapeuticresources.com/grief.html); and Cruse Bereavement Care's mail order lists (www.crusebereavementcare/publications.htm). Cruse's publication can be sourced in other ways, details at the end of the appendix below. **Specialist publishers** such as Baywood, (Amityville, New York) and Brunner-Routledge (New York/London) favour books on bereavement but are unlikely to be able to tell you about books which they do not publish.

The appendix gives a list of recent major publications covering the field of bereavement, loss, disasters and traumatic stress. It does not set out to be an exhaustive bibliography or to include the key works in our field, rather it cites well-indexed general texts and reviews which will give the reader a broad understanding of the field and guidance towards further reading.

Those who are not familiar with psychological terminology, scientific method or statistics will find some accounts of research heavy going. It is worth the effort to persist as one soon gets used to the language and many books provide a glossary of the terms used. Even so it is a good idea to keep a dictionary of psychology to hand and to read a basic text on research in psychology such as the paperback by Colin Robson, *Experiment, Design and Statistics in Psychology* (1994 London: Penguin Books, 1994).


CONCLUSION

Bereavement is a key to our understanding of many of the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Fascinating in its own right, it illuminates much else. Its special component, grief, is evident across nations and species. Through it we begin to understand the biological roots of human behaviour. It is intimately linked with love, creativity and maturation but also with depression, mental and physical illness.

Complex though the psychological and social consequences of bereavement may

be, we already know a great deal about the subject. Our knowledge comes from a wide range of sources. Historical, literary, scientific and clinical studies of children, adults and elderly members of a wide range of cultures and species need to be considered and linked together if we are to understand the field as a whole.

For those who enjoy reading and theorising there is a wealth of information to be gleaned and collated. For those who prefer active research, a less ambitious review of an area of special interest may be preferred. For teachers, a good knowledge of the field is vital and essential if we are to keep ahead of our students. For those who are trying to help particular bereaved people, a narrower focus will suffice to throw new light on their problems.

Whatever your motivation, be warned that research is addictive; but it is a rewarding addiction. 

APPENDIX

JOURNALS OF SPECIAL INTEREST

Bereavement and loss

Bereavement Care (international): Cruse House, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond, Surrey TW9 1UR, UK. www.crusebereavementcare

Omega: Journal of Death and Dying (international): Baywood Publishing, 26 Austin Avenue, PO Box 337, Amityville, NY 11701, USA. baywood.com

Death Studies (international): Taylor & Francis, 4 John Street, London WC1N 2ET. www.adec.org/pubs/dstud.htm

Mortality: Carfax Publishing, Taylor & Francis, Rankine Road, Basingstoke, Hants RG24 8PR, UK. www.tandf.co.uk/journals/alphalist.html

Illness, Crisis and Loss: Sage Publications, 2455 Teller Road, Thousand Oaks, CA 91320, USA/ 6, Bonhill Street, London EC2A 4PU, UK. www.sagepub.com/

Grief Matters: PO Box 1569, Clayton, South Victoria 3169, Australia. www.grief.org.au/grief_matters.htm

Palliative Care

Palliative Medicine

Palliative Care

The Hospice Journal

International Journal of Palliative Nursing
Psycho-Oncology

Ethics

Journal of Medical Ethics

Counselling

British Journal of Guidance and Counselling

Journal of Counselling Psychology

Psychodynamic Counselling

Groups

International Journal of Group Psychotherapy

Group Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy

British Journal of Psychotherapy

Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy Research

Families

Family Process

Group and Family Therapy

International Journal of Family Therapy

Journal of Family Therapy

Journal of Marital and Family Therapy

Pastoral Studies

Contact

Attachments

Attachment and Human Development

SOME MAJOR BOOKS ON BEREAVEMENT-RELATED TOPICS

Black D, Newman M, Harris-Hendrik, J Mezey G (eds). *Psychological Trauma: A developmental approach*. London: Gaskell, 1997.

***Dickenson D, Johnson M**. *Death, Dying and Bereavement*. London: Open University/Sage, 1993.

Doka K (ed). (1989) *Disenfranchised Grief*. Lexington, Mass, USA: Lexington Books, 1989.

Doyle D, Hanks GWC, MacDonald N (eds). *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Medicine*. Oxford, UK/New York/Tokyo, 1993.

Fulton R, Carlson J, Krohn K, Markusen E, Owen G. *Death, Grief and Bereavement: A bibliography, 1845-1975*. New York: Acer, 1975.

Hodgkinson PE, Stewart M. *Coping with Catastrophe: A handbook of disaster management*. New York/London: Routledge, 1991.

Jacobs S. *Traumatic Grief: Diagnosis, prevention and treatment*. Philadelphia, USA/London: Brunner Mazel, 1999.

***Klass D, Silverman PR, Nickman S** (eds). *Continuing Bonds: New understandings of grief*. Washington DC, USA/London: Taylor & Francis, 1996.

Marrone R. *Death Mourning and Caring*. New York/London: Brooks/Cole, 1997.

***Parkes CM**. *Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life (3rd edn)*. London/ New York: Routledge/Penguin/International Universities Press, 1996.

***Parkes CM, Laungani P, Young W** (eds). *Death and Bereavement across Cultures*. London: Routledge, 1996.

***Raphael B**. *The Anatomy of Bereavement*. London: Hutchinson, 1984

Raphael B. *When Disaster Strikes*. New York: Basic Books, 1986

Rosenblatt PC, Walsh RP, Jackson DA. *Grief and Mourning in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Washington DC, USA: HRAF Press, 1976.

Stedeford A. *Facing Death: Patients, families and professionals*. London: Heinemann, 1984.

Stroebe MS, Stroebe W, Hansson RO (eds). *Handbook of Bereavement*. Cambridge, UK/Victoria, Australia: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Zisook S (ed). *Biopsychosocial Aspects of Bereavement*. Washington DC, USA: American Psychiatric Press, 1987.

* Available from Cruse Bereavement Care, 126 Sheen Road, Richmond TW9 1UR, UK; ☎ (+44) 020 8939 9530; fax (+44) 020 8940 7638; info@crusebereavementcare.org.uk.

A SELF-HELP SERVICE

SAMM - support after murder and manslaughter (London)

Rose Dixon

National Training & Development Officer

The death of a loved one is painful and distressing, particularly when it occurs suddenly, but when the cause of death is murder or manslaughter, the problems are compounded and the aftermath can be very traumatic. In these cases, feelings of helplessness and shock are multiplied for the family who will have the added stress of a police investigation, sometimes with themselves as the main suspects. Add to this the media attention and the feeling of powerlessness over controlling what is said in public about your loved one, and you have a recipe for major bereavement problems.

One thing that can help bereaved people in this situation is to talk to others who have been through the same horrific experience and Support After Murder and Manslaughter (SAMM) offers this through a telephone helpline that individuals and professionals can ring for information and support. The helpline is manned from Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm by paid staff, and outside office hours by trained volunteers. We also have a network of support groups around the country which provide emotional support by telephone contact, visits or monthly meetings. In addition, we produce a quarterly newsletter.

Until you walk in another's shoes you cannot know how they feel. The strength of SAMM is that all of our members, helpline staff and volunteers have been through the nightmare experience of murder and can know more than others what it is like to cope afterwards. For instance, if there are children in the family who are also affected, adults often feel that the best thing to do is to protect them by not discussing the crime with them. But if children are not kept informed then their imagination will take over and run riot. It is far better to be honest with children and to include them in decisions about their future.


SAMM began as a sub-group within The Compassionate Friends (a registered charity offering support to parents whose child has died) called Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). In September 1990 POMC became a separately registered charity and then in 1994 the name was changed to SAMM to reflect the fact that

the extended family and friends of the victim are affected by a murder. We currently cover England and Wales, with a group operating in Edinburgh. SAMM also provides some telephone support in Northern Ireland and, encouraged by the local police, we are considering setting up a group there. Occasionally we handle enquiries from the Republic of Ireland, usually about murders that have taken place in England.

The basic human right to see and touch a loved one's body is denied in the case of murder. The relatives may be able to see the body but often only through a glass window: more importance seems to be given to protecting evidence than to the grief of the relatives.

Thankfully, the police are now more aware of the needs of relatives in the aftermath of murder, but there are still many problems for families. For instance, it can sometimes be months before a body is released, and the funeral must be delayed all this time. Here again, the rights of the bereaved seem to take second place and the rights of the accused (if there is one) to take precedence. There will inevitably be a post-mortem. The defence team may insist on a second post-mortem and, if there is more than one accused, there may even be a third! This is very painful for those close to the dead person who are often left feeling understandably resentful.

One important aspect of our work is raising awareness of the effects of murder on the surviving family by helping to train the professionals, ie police family liaison officers, coroner's officers etc. We also take part in interagency work parties and liaise regularly with the police, crown prosecution service, Home Office and probation service. We work particularly closely with Victim Support, a national charity offering help to victims and witness of crime, with whom we share the same national office.

The Home Office has funded a 4-year grant to enable SAMM to continue to support families and friends of murder victims. Our charity is governed by a national executive committee and its members, voted in at our AGM, are the trustees. Committee members and volunteers are offered regular training to keep them updated on issues relating to supporting traumatically bereaved people and we now have codes of conduct and of confidentiality, as well as a complaints procedure. For more information, contact Support After Murder and Manslaughter, Cranmer House, 39 Brixton Road, London SW9 6DZ. Helpline: 020 7735 3838. 

BOOKS FROM CRUSE

Send for our publications catalogues

- For those who are bereaved
- For those professionally involved with bereavement
- For children and young people and those working with them

← Cruse contact details in first column