

# A Model for Recovery from Traumatic bereavement and loss

## Introduction

There is a growing literature on the psychological impact on individuals and families affected by traumatic bereavement through murder or manslaughter (Zinzow et al, 2009; Healey, 2004). Some will recover and come to terms with their loss with minimal support or intervention, other than that offered in the immediate aftermath by the police or by the national charities such as Victim Support in the UK. Others may require or benefit from more formal interventions from mental health services. Under the health-care system in the UK, these services are invariably individually focused. In 2006, the Mental Health Policy Group of the Centre for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics published a report urging that psychological therapy should be made available to everyone in Britain. The report, now commonly referred to as the Layard Report (London School of Economics, 2006), argued that 'such a service would pay for itself by the reduced expenditure on incapacity benefits from people being able to go back to work.' It has led to a number of government-funded initiatives, known as the Increasing Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme, focused on therapeutic help for adults with common mental health problems (in particular mild to moderate depression and anxiety). A clear distinction is made between low-intensity treatment (four sessions) and high-intensity treatment. This initiative has already had an impact on NHS psychological therapy services within adult mental health services, injecting much needed extra finance and thus extra resources into a chronically under-funded service.

However, the needs of those affected by serious crime, including murder and manslaughter are more than often not met by current services. Access to support and care (including more formal therapeutic interventions) tend not to 'fit the box' of current evidence based approaches for psychological trauma as advocated by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence in Health (NICE) guidelines. Current guidelines suggest that Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapies (TF-CBT) should be the 'treatment' of choice based on evidence garnered through randomised controlled trials. Whilst trauma focused CBT will be undoubtedly effective for many trauma survivors as the evidence suggests, there is limited evidence that such approaches have utility for those experiencing sudden traumatic bereavement and where the needs of surviving family members and loved ones are complex, multifaceted and because of the involvement of the justice system, long term and ongoing. Often there is no 'post' to their traumatic stress. In some cases TF-CBT may have some benefit where chronic post-traumatic symptoms persist, following careful assessment.

This paper argues that a psychosocial approach to trauma healing takes a more holistic approach to the mental health effects of a trauma, especially traumatic bereavement.

It takes account of the close relationship between the psychological and social effects of trauma and/or violence. The psychological effect refers to how the experiences impact emotions, thoughts, behaviour, memory, learning, and the meaning we make of an event or experience. The social effects refer to how the traumatic experiences affect and alter people's relationships with others. In the case of bereavement through murder or manslaughter, this includes sudden, unexpected and violent loss, often leading to estrangement from family members and friends, affecting social and occupational functioning, leading to alienation, isolation with associated economic costs to the individual and wider society. Trauma work and healing needs to attend to address both individual welfare and social justice if there is to be long-term healing and recovery. This work must take into account both the

current situation and the underlying root causes which lead to violence and harm. There are various ways of dealing with conflict that are both curative as well as preventative. A traumatic event such as the murder or serious assault of a family member can have repercussions far beyond the immediate impact. Such an event can often become a defining moment in a victim's life, with consequences impacting on every aspect of day to day living, such as the ability to work, physical and mental health, relationships with family members and so on.

## **Escaping Victimhood -a model for personal recovery from trauma**

Escaping Victimhood (EV) was founded in 2004 by criminal justice practitioners who were increasingly aware that, in many ways, the needs of victims are not met by the processes of the criminal justice system. Barbara Tudor and Tim Newell with backgrounds in probation and prison services shared a commitment to restorative practice of seeking to meet unmet needs of those affected by crime. For the criminal justice system, the successful prosecution of the perpetrator of the crime inevitably marks closure. Closure, for a victim however, is not likely to be found at this time, when the pain of a traumatic event may become particularly intense and the grieving process may either be only just beginning or be obstructed by the overwhelming impact of their loss.

A common and debilitating effect of victimisation is the severe and ongoing loss of control, the sense of helplessness and the fear of re-victimisation. Families of murder victims can often feel isolated and stigmatised within their communities. Bereavement and loss affects members of the same family in different ways, leading to different coping strategies, which can often cause the disintegration of the infrastructure of the family unit, creating new victims of those affected by the long-term fallout. Many victims of serious crime or traumatic bereavement may "self-medicate" with alcohol and drugs. This can lead to a range of drug or alcohol related problems, including serious accidents, injury and illness. Victims of serious crime often also find themselves unable to continue to work, which can lead to severe economic hardship and in some extreme circumstances homelessness. Preoccupation with the traumatic event can also seriously impact upon and disrupt normal parenting patterns. This in turn can lead to confusion and unhappiness in children and at worst truanting, anti-social and criminal behaviour, which can be exacerbated by the child's own experience of the original crime (e.g. loss of a sibling or parent).

The experience of being involved in a traumatic incident whether it be a serious assault or sudden bereavement through homicide or manslaughter can happen to anyone, anywhere and at almost any time, as evidenced all too frequently by incidents that have occurred in both the UK and abroad, whether perpetrated by another family member (as is often the case) or by acts of violence, including terrorism. It is this random element that makes the experience so terrifying and shocking, in that the individuals cannot in any way prepare or indeed protect themselves from the effects of the traumatic event.

Escaping Victimhood (EV) provides a unique programme, which has been designed to help people affected by the trauma of serious crime, murder or manslaughter. Studies in Scandinavia have indicated that the opportunity to meet others affected by similar traumatic events such as traumatic bereavement is highly valued and promotes healing and recovery (Dyregrov, 2000). The EV programme works to assist those traumatised by crime or traumatic bereavement to move from the position of victim to that of a survivor. It aims to help people reclaim their lives and promote post-traumatic growth.

The current programme comprises a week long residential workshop and a follow up day for up to 12 participants. The design of the workshop may vary according to the needs of the participants but will always include certain core elements. These are:

- The opportunity to learn about the impact of traumatic events and traumatic bereavement on the individual, family and community and to reflect on this from their personal perspective.
- Workshops on personal change to help participants locate the traumatic event within the context of their life's journey, and to provide some tools for self-help.
- Body work such as massage and tai chi or meditation, which provide relaxation, the chance to learn new techniques, and the potential for the release of traumatic memories held in the body.
- Creative workshops, such as painting or photography, providing participants with new ways of seeing the world and expressing their experience.
- Comfortable accommodation and good food – giving participants space away from their normal lives in the company of others with similar experiences.
- One to one sessions to help apply the learning to their personal circumstance are offered by the facilitators through the week.

EV has run 15 workshops, one for survivors of domestic violence, and 14 for families of murder or manslaughter victims. Feedback from participants has identified that, for many, this has been a life changing experience. The participants also tend to stay in contact with each other, forming informal support networks. The EV programme combines many different activities designed to enable people to move forward from the state of trauma to a more positive future, beginning the process of post traumatic growth (Joseph, 2012; Joseph, Murphy and Regel, 2012).

### **The experiences and testimonials of survivors**

The following are extracts from written testimonials provided by two participants.

*“Before the workshop I can only describe myself as depressed, confused, no self-worth, questioning why me. I did attend every one of the events, feeling more comfortable with myself and knowing everyone knew what everyone else felt. With the best intentions of friends and family, if you have not experienced the trauma of violent crime, you cannot possibly understand.*

*The support of the team gave me hope, enabling me to move on and not be a victim. Every victim of crime should have the right to experience the help that the workshop gave me. I can never thank you enough.*

*When arriving at Jordans we were just strangers dealing with our own traumas.*

*When we left Jordans, we were stronger people thanks to the dedicated team.*

*I am still in contact with someone who was on the workshop and we still share the emotions and the happy memories of the Jordans, we have both read all the books that Dwight recommended and have learned so much from them.*

*Without the workshop I would never had come to terms with what happened to me”*

Participant from workshop

*“To have been invited to the Escaping Victimhood pilot scheme was, for me, a privilege, and the workshop should be made available to all families affected by trauma, regardless of their status or postcode. When [my friend] and I arrived on Monday we were both anxious about what we had let ourselves in for.*

*Speaking for myself I was a broken spirit. Almost immediately, over lunch, we were put at our ease. We learned very quickly (for the first time in nine years) people were accepting us and not judging us in our broken state.*

*Jay explained in terms that we all understood the workings of our minds and allayed our fears that we were ‘mad’ people. We were traumatised by the horrific circumstances that were thrust upon us, and over which we had no control.*

*The facilitators brought out the best in us, relaxing us into feeling human again. For me the combination of massage, art and walking the labyrinth were especially important in making connections, as I have felt totally isolated on my horrendous journey to survive.*

*They did their utmost to ensure that we all had what we needed to help us, and became friends to us all.*

*With all the treatments and care made available to us, we felt able to respond and open up, to unleash some of our pain that has been trapped within us for what seems like an eternity, in a safe and peaceful environment. It was OK to cry, laugh, shout; to feel and show emotions, something that we are not allowed to do in our society.*

*To date (three months later), I have carried away with me all the benefits I received during my stay. However, I would quickly like to add that our society is terrified of people whose pain is palpable. They don't know how to cope and are so frightened they're not even trying*

The latter contributor also said that before the workshop the image she had of her son was of him in the morgue with his throat cut. Since the workshop she remembered him as clear eyed and happy. At the workshop she also reported herself 'seeing in colour for the first time in 9 years', because the world had turned monochrome when she received the news of her son's murder. She has since gone on to publish a book about her experiences.

Participants have re-established family roles and relationships and two have since become trustees of Escaping Victimhood. A mother of a murdered young man has been to meet with the murderer in prison and has had a deep conversation of a transformative nature with him so that she feels a great burden lifted from her. She is gaining qualifications in counselling and hopes to provide services of story-telling on future workshops. A group of several participants has continued to meet for self-help and support. Another two participants who had suffered domestic violence have continued to meet monthly.

Much of the work currently undertaken to support survivors of serious crime revolves around their role as witnesses and the understandable preoccupation of the criminal justice system to secure a conviction. Relatively few resources are committed to helping survivors identify what they need to help them move on from the burden of victimhood. Different people will need different kinds of help and there is much that mainstream services could do to improve their response to practical and emotional difficulties such as housing and financial problems and access to counselling and ongoing support.

Criminal justice agencies often stress that securing a successful prosecution will afford the survivors closure. It does not. It affords the police, the courts and the media closure but does not enable victims to be free of the emotional life sentence that can result from a sudden violent attack or traumatic bereavement. During the court process survivors may receive offers of help but, once a conviction is secured (or if no conviction is possible because the culprit is unknown or has died or the trauma results from a natural disaster), the victims find themselves isolated and unsupported and struggling to find ways of regaining control of their lives. It is at this moment that the Escaping Victimhood process can help by focussing on recovery for the survivor rather than the fate of the perpetrator.

To engage in the process of moving from victim to survivor, an individual must

- Put an end to the original injustice
- Accept that they have been the object of injustice, malevolence or misfortune and that this may continue to impact upon them
- Prevent the unjust consequences of the original injustice carrying on unrestrained
- Regain control of their life
- Regain trust and confidence in other people
- Define their own status by rejecting the label of 'victim'
- Move on and away from the trauma

## Conclusion

It is not our intention to offer formal clinical interventions and 'treatment' but to provide a comprehensive, therapeutic environment which facilitates change and personal growth and makes it possible for individuals to evolve out of victimhood and towards a return toward what for them would be emotional equilibrium. It is not the intention of EV to replicate clinical services which may or may not be available for those who wish to access them but rather to offer an innovative response to traumatic bereavement and loss in a group residential setting – something that is not readily accessible through conventional mental health services.

Our experiences do not define us but they do affect us. Following exposure to a traumatic event, the impact is not only felt by the individual, but also by families and communities. The rationale of EV is that individuals were functional and balanced before the traumatic incident, but as a result of the incident their equilibrium has been disturbed, therefore with appropriate responses to their loss, grief and post traumatic reactions they can recover and grow through natural urge toward the self-actualising tendency. Traumatic loss provokes a developing sense of loss of control over wellbeing and routine, loss of safety, loss of belonging within one's family unit and relationships, loss of self-esteem, status and a real and powerful sense of being locked into the past at the point of trauma, unable to escape the horrific reality of what has occurred.

We have chosen to use a collaborative, experiential, person-centred approach to this work incorporating the core principles of: Unconditional Positive Regard - for the participants and fellow facilitators; empathy - with participants in their reality; Congruence - in that all facilitators are honest, open and real about themselves and their interactions with the participants and each other. Courage and commitment is required from every facilitator to adhere to the principles underlying this methodology and to all conditions arising within the group format. We are underpinned in all we do by principles of restorative process, ensuring that the focus is on the needs of the individual, the work is centred on repairing the harm, it is voluntary and involve informed consent at all times and it trusts the person to take their learning from the experience and apply it without continuing dependency on an agency.

Judith Herman(1992) has presented a robust model for working with traumatised individuals who are victims of all causes of trauma, indicating that recovery is often about 'restoring connections: between the public and private worlds, between the individual and the community, between men and women.'

The impact of traumatic experiences has many basic features in common, therefore the recovery process also follows a common pathway. These fundamental stages of recovery are: establishing safety; reconstructing the trauma narrative; restoring the connection between survivors, their families and their community. 'Survivors challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of their present symptoms in the light of past events' (Herman, 1992, p2-3)

If we really believe that justice needs to be balanced, then this work will succeed and foster post-traumatic growth amongst survivors.

Tim Newell and Stephen Regel, Trustees  
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