

Traumatic Bereavement: Basic Research and Clinical Implications

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Losing a loved one suddenly or under traumatic circumstances often leaves survivors completely overwhelmed, their lives fundamentally changed. Survivors experience what is termed *traumatic bereavement*, which is associated with enduring symptoms of trauma, such as intrusive thoughts, and of grief, such as yearning for the loved one. Research has found that in most cases, the symptoms associated with traumatic loss are significantly more intense and prolonged than those following a natural death. They are also more pervasive, affecting virtually all aspects of the survivor's life. Moreover, it has also been found that survivors of traumatic loss often have difficulty accepting what has happened, struggle with issues surrounding responsibility and guilt, question their religious beliefs, worry that their loved one may have suffered, and live in fear that they or someone in their family will also die. In this article, we review basic research on the domains of life affected by a traumatic loss and the risk factors that heighten survivors' vulnerability to traumatic bereavement. We then describe a comprehensive treatment approach, which is based on the available research on traumatic bereavement, specifically developed for survivors of sudden, traumatic loss. The treatment involves 3 critical components: building resources, processing trauma, and facilitating mourning.

Keywords: risk factors associated with traumatic bereavement, trauma and loss, traumatic bereavement, traumatic grief, treatment of traumatic bereavement

One hot summer day when she was 6 years old, Emily discovered her father's lifeless body hanging in their garage. It was a grisly scene, replete with horrific sights and smells. Thereafter, Emily saw a succession of therapists. Each one addressed with her the psychological impact of dealing with her father's decision to take his own life, the resulting abandonment that she experienced, growing up fatherless, and grieving for all she had lost. Although she improved over the years, Emily continued to experience frequent nightmares, some emotional numb-

ness, fear of intimacy, an exaggerated startle response, and increased agitation in hot, humid weather. Somehow she felt unable to move on with her life.

It was fully 25 years before one therapist asked Emily, "Exactly what did you see when you found your father?" Finally, someone had begun to tap into Emily's experience of the grotesque circumstances associated with her father's death, not solely the deprivations it had caused.

The goal of this article is to provide an overview of the research literature relevant to traumatic loss, such as the one Emily experienced, and to describe a comprehensive treatment approach specifically developed for such losses. A death is considered traumatic if it occurs without warning; if it is untimely; if it involves violence; if there is damage to the loved one's body; if it was caused by a perpetrator with intent to harm; if the survivor regards the death as preventable; if the survivor believes that the loved one suffered; or if the survivor regards the death, or manner of death, as unfair and unjust. Other deaths typically regarded as traumatic include those in which the survivor witnessed the death; those in which the mourner is con-

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The majority of topics addressed in this article receive more detailed coverage in the book *Traumatic Bereavement: A Practitioner's Guide*, published by Guilford Press (Pearlman, Wortman, Feuer, Farber, & Rando, 2014). All case examples in this article are excerpted from therapy sessions discussed in the text.

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