Grief & Loss in the 21st Century

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March, 2019

We are all too aware of the stories and statistics: “mass shootings” or “mass tragedies” (there is no clear-cut definition of these terms) happen all too frequently. Thousand Oaks – Borderline Bar & Grill. Las Vegas. Sandy Hook. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School. Like wildfires, they are named for the geographic location in which they occurred, they are all consuming for a period of time, and they change forever the lives of those touched by them.

Whether we are directly or indirectly impacted by these incidents, they leave a mark. Maybe our exposure is only through the news and social media. But maybe we know someone who has been directly exposed or worse yet, we’ve lost someone to a senseless act of violence. For many, the world feels less and less safe all the time, and yet for most, life goes on.

What do we do with all this? How do we heal and grieve and remain present for our friends and family, and attuned to their needs? How do we not grow hard-hearted in an effort to protect ourselves? How do we not fall apart?

First, it might be helpful to do a brief review of what grief is. Grief is a normal, human reaction to loss, whether through death or some other means (i.e. transitioning a child to college, moving, changing jobs, etc.). According to Linda Schupp, normal grief has a known cause and no correlation with self-esteem. Normal grief is also known as uncomplicated grief or uncomplicated bereavement. “…normal grieving is a process, recreating the cognitive schema around the meaning of life… Part of the grieving process involves restructuring a life without the deceased.” Normal grief reactions following a loss through death include appetite disturbance, heart palpitations, insomnia, anxiety, guilt, numbness, memory problems, inability to concentrate, crying, and keeping the room of the deceased intact (to name just a few).

Complicated grief “is a disruption in the normal grief process which prohibits healthy closure and healing for the affected person.” Factors that complicate grief include a history of depression, social problems, the death of a child, a history of childhood abuse, repressed emotions, and unresolved previous losses. Another factor that complicates grief is a sudden unexpected death or loss.

Mass shootings or mass violence would fall into the category of “sudden unexpected death or loss,” or traumatic grief. Traumatic grief reveals the lie that grief “follows a specific course and resolves at a predictable point – or that it resolves at all.” Unfortunately, in these situations, there sometimes is no sense of closure.

There are unique qualities to traumatic grief. This is a shocking loss that can’t be prepared for, and it rocks your world. The world no longer meets your expectation of safety. With normal grief, reminiscing about the deceased often brings peace, but with traumatic grief, talking about the person may be what triggers or retraumatizes family and friends. In fact, the criterion for Traumatic Grief includes efforts to avoid reminders of the deceased and a shattered worldview (e.g., lost sense of security, trust, or control).
People are not often ready for counseling or other professional help immediately following a tragedy. Most people experience some level of shock and have a hard time just moving through the day. In time, they may be ready for counseling, but in the meantime, a gentle presence and support from a caring friend or family member is recommended. Memory is not always sharp following a loss, as poor concentration and forgetfulness are hallmarks of grief.

An instrumental piece in helping children following a mass tragedy is parents and adults first assessing and dealing with their own responses to the crisis and to their own stress. Children look to adults to make them feel safe and adults need to be models for how to manage traumatic events. Keep regular schedules as much as possible, including meals and exercise. Try to balance out the upsetting news by reminding yourself of people and events that are meaningful, comforting, and encouraging. And always engage in healthy behaviors which enhance your ability to cope and heal. This includes eating well balanced meals, getting plenty of rest, build physical activity into the day, avoid drugs and alcohol, and add relaxation techniques if necessary (yoga, breathing, meditation, prayer).

1 Jackson, p. 12
1 Schupp, p. 11
1 Jackson, p. 12