Bereavement: Reeling in the Years

It is a chilling statistic: Sudden, traumatic accidents are the number-one killer of persons aged 44 and under in the United States, claiming approximately 150,000 victims annually, with nearly one-third of those deaths stemming from car crashes. Yet the psychological impact of these losses on family members and the time required to complete the mourning process remain largely unexplored.

An extensive follow-up study of individuals who lost a spouse or child in a motor vehicle crash now indicates that emotional recovery is longer and more difficult than has often been assumed by clinicians and researchers. Four to seven years after the accident, bereaved spouses and parents in the study reported marked depression and a failure to resolve their loss.

"Our data clearly indicate that following the traumatic loss of one's spouse or child, lasting distress is not a sign of individual coping failure but rather a common response to the situation," says Camille B. Wortman of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who conducted the study along with Michigan's Darrin R. Lehman and Allan F. Williams of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in Washington, D.C.

The data also undermine current theories of bereavement that assume an individual will return to normal functioning within several years after a loss has occurred. One view is that a bereaved person goes through several stages of emotional distress, including shock, anger and depression, followed by resolution of the loss. Failure to achieve such resolution after several years, according to psychoanalytic theory, signals an inability to free oneself from the emotional bond to a deceased loved one.

Despite these contentions, say the researchers, only the new study and a Harvard University project have carefully examined the effects of bereavement beyond two years after the loss. In the Harvard study, 59 widows and widowers were interviewed two to four years after their spouses died. More than 40 percent were rated as showing moderate to severe anxiety compared with nonbereaved controls. Those with brief or no warning of their spouse's death did much more poorly than those with at least two weeks to prepare themselves for the loss.

Lehman and his colleagues, whose report is in the January JOURNAL OF PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY, looked even farther down the road of the mourning process after a sudden loss. They used state records to identify every motor vehicle fatality in Wayne County, Mich., between 1976 and 1979. Potential subjects were then located and asked to be interviewed in 1983 in their homes. The spouse study included 39 bereaved individuals (most of them women) and 39 nonbereaved controls matched for sex, age, income, education and number and ages of children. The parent study was conducted with 41 pairs of bereaved parents and 41 matched pairs of nonbereaved parents.

Though individual responses varied, responses to structured interviews generally showed bereaved spouses to be doing significantly poorer than controls on several indicators of general functioning, such as depression, anxiety and other psychiatric symptoms, social contacts, satisfaction with current life situation, apprehension about the future and confidence in the ability to cope with serious problems.

Among those who had lost a child, significant differences in functioning, especially depression, were observed between bereaved and control parents, but these were not as pervasive as differences in the spouse study. Part of the reason, suggest the researchers, may be that a spouse is a more critical source of support and security than a child.

Nearly all of the bereaved subjects said the deceased continued to occupy their thoughts and conversations, often making them feel "hurt and pained." About two-thirds said they had not found any meaning in the death.

The researchers concentrated on group differences and did not identify bereaved individuals who achieved a good level of functioning or factors distinguishing them from the majority still experiencing substantial distress. But since about half of the bereaved persons they originally attempted to contact had either died or refused to participate in the study, Wortman says, "our estimates of psychological distress among the bereaved dealing with a sudden, unexpected loss are conservative." When there is time to prepare for the loss, she adds, distress is probably less severe but comparably long-lasting.

A majority of the same bereaved subjects, notes Wortman, reported that well-intentioned comments from family and friends about the loss were often unsupportive of their continuing distress. Such comments included "Don't question God's will," "Your wife is at peace" and "I know how you feel." Nonjudgmental support — for instance, "I'm here anytime if you need to talk" — from family and friends is particularly important, she says, because many bereaved people do not seek out psychotherapy or support groups. *— B. Bower*

$4.4 B Super Collider gets go-ahead

President Reagan last week approved construction of the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC), which will be the world's most advanced particle accelerator. Although some 40 states have expressed interest in becoming home to the $4.4 billion project, Energy Secretary John S. Herrington says, "We have made no determination as to where the [SSC] will be sited — and there is no front-runner."

SSC would employ roughly 10,000 superconducting magnets to focus and guide two beams of 20-trillion-electron-volt (20 TeV) protons in opposite directions through a 52-mile, racetrack-shaped underground tunnel (SN: 9/22/84, p.181; 1/5/85, p.5). At four experimental stations the beams of protons — accelerated to almost the speed of light — would be allowed to collide, creating new subatomic particles.

According to the Washington, D.C.-based Universities Research Association, a consortium of 56 universities that helped design the project, SSC will be a "microscope of unparalleled power," able to probe distances one-thousandth the diameter of a proton to "provide unprecedented insights into the world of elementary particles and, indirectly, into the birth of our universe."

Leon Lederman, director of the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory in Batavia, Ill., and other particle physicists who had pushed for the project were ecstatic at news of SSC's go-ahead. Lederman describes SSC's mission as "to study the origin of mass." Along the way, he expects "some new physics must appear."

Not all physicists share Lederman's enthusiasm. One of SSC's most vocal critics is Rustom Roy, former director of the Materials Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University in University Park. To spend this much money for particle physics "will just hurt the rest of science," says Roy, who claims that "at least 99 percent of all scientists would vote against building it [SSC]." Moreover, in tackling SSC alone, the United States is "also losing a prime opportunity for the internationalization of science," he says. *— J. Raloff*

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