

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Journalling as a response to loss and grief: A therapeutic tool arising from personal experience

Anecdote, personal experience and observation of patients suggest that the unexpected death of a child causes particularly disabling pain and despair. It can scar parents for life, in a way that those who have not experienced such distress find hard to understand.

Journalling, consisting of recording and reflection, is a recognized method of coming to terms with difficult situations both professionally¹ and in everyday life.²

In the year following the accidental death of my eldest son and his girlfriend I recorded my experience and feelings in verse. I believe that the painful and tearful writing and repeated revision of that verse, equivalent to a journalling process, helped integrate the reality of his death into my life.

Some of the poems were published in a book form to raise money for a Memorial Trust for needy medical students, and in the hope that they might help other bereaved parents.³ Feedback and reviews suggests that the book has been helpful to two groups of people.

Bereaved parents and other relatives have valued the fellow-feeling of suffering, and have found recognition of another's 'dark night of the soul' supportive as they struggle to accept tragedy.

It may be that reading and re-reading the cycle of poems was a vicarious journalling process for those

parents, similar to that which I experienced as I wrote and revised the texts.

Aristotle described the cathartic effect of vicarious experience of tragedy,⁴ and there is evidence that writing about traumatic events can reduce disease symptoms.⁵ Perhaps sharing another's reflections on a traumatic experience similar to one's own may also improve personal well-being.

Doctors, clergy and others caring for the bereaved have found the book useful to give or lend to bereaved patients. It has also helped them to understand the despair of bereaved parents and empathize with them. Personal experience and discussion with other bereaved parents suggest that one of the greatest needs of the bereaved is to feel that others understand one's despair. Understanding the distress of the bereaved does not reduce that distress, but can help them bear it.

A book of this type may be a useful resource for doctors caring for those bereaved of a child.

Anthony E.J. FITCHETT
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References

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- 2 Jansen MA. The prescription to grieve. *Hosp. J.* 1985; **1**: 103–9.
- 3 Fitchett T. *As well as Joy – Elegies for Marcus and Rachel.*

- 4 Aristotle. *Poetics.* London: Penguin Books, 1996.
- 5 Smyth JM, Stone AA, Hurewitz A, Kaell A. Effects of writing about stressful experiences on symptom reduction in patients with asthma or rheumatoid arthritis: a randomised trial. *JAMA* 1999; **28**: 1304–9.