LIFE INTERRUPTED:

Supporting Individuals and Families Experiencing the Sudden and Traumatic Death of a Loved One

The Elizabeth Hospice
The Unique Nature of This Loss

How sudden & unexpected loss differs:
- No goodbye, No apology—No resolution
- No time to adjust or make preparation
- Difficult to understand/accept/process cause of death
- May include violence
- May include feelings of violation, betrayal, abandonment, rejection

What else?
Assumptions about our world—things we take for granted...

- The world is a safe and orderly place...or is it??
- I’m strong, capable, and secure...or am I??
- Do the right things, and good things will happen...really??

(see I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye, Noel & Blair, p. 37--38)
THE GRIEF JOURNEY

A brief overview—

- Shock
- Disorganization
- (Re-)Organization
- Reinvestment

How the landscape changes in sudden loss…
SHOCK: BRAIN NOVOCAIN

- What it looks like
- How it protects
- How it hinders
- How long it lasts
SPECIAL FEATURES TO CONSIDER

- Why??...the need to understand
- Shame
- Stigma
- Guilt
- Blame
- Anger
- Low self-esteem
- Fear, agitation
- Medical, legal authorities
- Sense of helplessness
- Unfinished business, regrets
Changes that Might Occur

Physically:
- Weight gain/loss
- Forget to eat
- Sleep less/more
- Increased/decreased energy
- High blood pressure
- Heart problems, chest pain
- Headaches
- Stomach problems
- Alcohol or drug abuse, relapse
- Frequent accidents
Emotionally:
- Surges of grief
- No interests
- Increased alone time/Difficulty being alone
- Closer to loved ones/Increased conflicts
- Forgetful; trouble concentrating
- Rages/increased anger, irritability
- Feel unsafe
- Surprising strengths
Changes...

Productivity:
- Work excessively/Unable to work
- Miss deadlines, easily overwhelmed
- Boss or co-worker pressure
- Employer is supportive (or not)
- Lengthy blank stares, lack of self-awareness
{CHANGES...}

Financial:
- Unexpected costs worrisome/Don’t care
- Behind in bill paying
- Help received from donations
C H A N G E S ...  

Spirituallly:
- Increased spiritual awareness/Reconnect with spiritual roots
- Unsure what matters/Meaninglessness
- Feel disconnected
- No joy or pleasure
Family/Relationships:
- Increased family longing/Family rifts deepen
- Worried about family members/Distance, withdraw
- Mate doesn’t understand
Responses to Traumatic Grief

- A response to a traumatic event—whether one witnessed it or not
- Responses can include panic attacks, flashbacks, re-living and retelling what happened, nightmares, & active avoidance of reminders
- Fight/flight/freeze—trauma survivors often freeze
**The Brain and Trauma**

3rd Brain: High Level
Control: Foresight
Functions and Basic Drives:
- Perception and differentiation of thoughts and emotions
- Discrimination of appropriate behavior
- Self-reflection
- Problem resolution
- Goal satisfaction

1st Brain: Low Level
Control: Reflex/Instinct
Functions and Basic Drives:
- Approach/Avoidance
- Hormonal control
- Temperature control
- Hunger/Thirst
- Reproductive drive
- Respiration and heart rate control

2nd Brain: Mid Level
Control: Hindsight
Functions and Basic Drives:
- Territoriality
- Fear
- Anger
- Attack
- Maternal Love
- Anxiety
- Hate
- Jealousy
ACE Study:

- Collaboration between Kaiser Permanente and Center for Disease Control (CDC)
- Studied relationship between chronic stress in childhood and adult health outcomes
- Data collected 1995—1997
  - 17,000 adult Kaiser members’ surveys on childhood experiences and current health
- Results published in 1998; other subsequent studies borrowed and expanded upon it
**ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences)**

Original study measured/scored 10 ACEs, including:
- Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse
- Physical and emotional neglect
- Households with mental illness, domestic violence, parental divorce or separation, substance abuse or incarceration

Lead to stress, can result in trauma and chronic stress responses
Can impact child’s developing brain, linked to higher risk for negative adult outcomes (e.g., smoking, diabetes, heart disease, suicide, etc.)
THREE-STEP TREATMENT PLAN

1. Stabilize: basic coping skills must be learned, including ability to self-soothe

2. Process: externalizing emotions, finding meaning

3. Re-integrate: “closing up” the client
What Helps???

- Much controversy over most effective treatments for trauma and traumatic grief.

- What doesn’t help—extreme isolation, self-harm, violence to others, substance or alcohol abuse, or forcing oneself to focus on details of what happened.

- Often helpful (sometimes essential) for bereaved to check in with his physician and/or psychiatrist.
WANTED: A GRIEF HELPER

Finding the right balance—

(quote by Father Joe Mahoney)
Sources of Support

- Support is crucial
- Questions to ask or to help someone explore:
  - Who in your life is supportive to you?
  - Who is supporting you today?
  - Who is the one person you can call in the middle of the night?
  - Who might you be trying to protect by hiding your feelings?
  - Who are the people in your life that do not feel good or safe for you to be around?
Questions to ask/explore:

Do you have a faith community, spiritual beliefs, or spiritual practice?

Does your faith/spirituality sustain you? If so, can you draw upon that now?

Is there someone from your faith community or with similar beliefs you could contact for support?
A Life is More Than the Ending!

The death is foremost in the grieving person’s mind, BUT…

Important and valuable to help them also focus on loved one’s life!

Who was this person?

What does he mean to you?

What kinds of things did you enjoy together?

What are some of your favorite things you shared?

What was his sense of humor like?

What were her last words to you?

Photos?
HOW CAN I HELP?

- Most important intervention: **Be there.** Compassionate, gentle presence more important than anything you say; bear witness; accompany them in their pain
- Avoid clichés
- Use loved one’s name.
- Listen patiently; reassure they are not “going crazy.”
- Help think through difficult decisions, & encourage delay of big decisions.
- Remind there is no “one right way” to respond.
- Remind to take care of basic needs, e.g., food, water, sleep
She closed her eyes,
Honoring my pain with her
Silence
And I knew she understood

...Terri St. Cloud, Bone Sighs
VIOLENT DEATHS

- Homicide
- Suicide
- DUI-related accidents
- Drowning
- Falls
- Vehicular accidents
- War, terrorism
Factors that complicate a death:

**Violence**
- PTS symptoms

**Violation:** wrongful, violation of one’s rights
- Victimization/Anger

**Volitional:** willful or negligent act
- Compulsive Inquiry

**Voyeuristic:** private life becomes public

*Survivors of Violent Loss*
VIOLENT DEATH...

- Anger, rage, demand for justice (retribution/retaliation)
- Crime scene protocol (not allowed in to home, office)
- Victim identification (“the body”)
- Medical exam, legal imperatives—family often feels left out of process; possibly considered suspects or “person of interest”
- Victims may be blamed for not preventing death

Survivors of Violent Loss
One of the most helpful interventions

- **Benefits**—“fools” brain into perceiving world as not so threatening
- Brain sends out hormones & electrical signals, telling body to relax, thus countering fight/flight/freeze response
- Heart rate and breathing slow down

*Survivors of Violent Loss*
SELF CARE–NOT OPTIONAL!

Create the space and time to care for your soul

“I am a part of all that I have met.”…Tennyson

We bear the weight of “LOSS,” not just “losses”
“You have the need and the right to spend part of your life caring for your soul. It is not easy. You have to resist the demands of the work-oriented, often defensive, element in your psyche that measures life only in terms of output—how much you produce—not in terms of the quality of your life experiences…To be a soulful person means to go against all the pervasive, prove-yourself values of our culture and instead treasure what is unique and internal and valuable in yourself and your own personal evolution.”

J.S. Bolen, M.D.
“May you see light where there was only darkness, hope where there seemed nothing but despair; may your fear be replaced with faith and insight; may you feel some victory in the defeat and a sense of the sacred web into which we are all woven. Most of all, may you stay in tune with your capacity to love life, even as you are engulfed by death.”

Noel & Blair, I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye
Questions
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- Brook Noel & Pamela D. Blair, Ph.D., *I Wasn’t Ready to Say Goodbye*, 2000
- Connie Saindon, MFT & Survivors of Violent Loss
- Jamie Marich, Ph.D., LPCC-S, LICDC, *Trauma, PTSD and Traumatic Grief: Effective Assessments and Interventions*, 2014
- Janice Harris Lord, *No Time for Goodbyes*, 2006
- J. William Worden, Ph.D., ABPP, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 2009
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“We encourage people to live, really live, before they die. People think that hospice is about dying, but it’s really about celebrating life.”

~ Betty Bulen, Founder of The Elizabeth Hospice

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