

**Emotional Healing:  
Realizing Resilience After Our Darkest Hours**

*It is suffering that propels us from the  
quiet shores of everyday life into the turbulent  
sea in which real growth occurs.*

- Kathleen A Brehony -

People want to be happy, find meaning in life, and avoid negative emotions. But human suffering is inevitable. We age and eventually die, and along the way we lose people we love. Children leave home, pets pass away, and our careers and family life have their ups and downs. Critical events throughout our life's journey activate negative emotions, and while feeling grief and sorrow is reasonable and healthy, it is necessary to heal and resume a constructive life. This month and next, I review strategies for finding resilience after a tragic emotional event.

**Emotional Healing at Virginia Tech**

Whenever I travel and tell someone I teach at Virginia Tech (VT), I get the predictable question, "How are the students, faculty, and staff doing?" My *ISHN* article last June reviewed the events and personal reactions following the mass killing at VT that took the lives of 27 students and 5 professors, while injuring 29 more on April 16, 2007. I offered a positive view by highlighting incredible campus leadership and resolve throughout the painful aftermath. I also reviewed the actively-caring communication that revealed world-wide concern and compassion.

Many on our campus are still struggling with negative emotions. Some tell me they're sick of the media attention; others tell me they're sad and still grieving in the midst of a culture that can't understand. I even hear anger from some students and faculty who claim the campus slogans "We will prevail" and "We will never forget" reflect only surface talk, putting more focus on the event than the people involved, thereby impeding a deeper healing process.

While these reactions reflect diverse emotions, all are negative and imply a need for emotional healing. They call for more resilience. Resilient individuals feel the same distress and sadness experienced by others, but they are able to rebound and resume their prior lifestyle. How do they do this?

Below I review six evidence-based coping strategies for developing emotional resilience. I learned these from the profound book – *After the Darkest Hour: How Suffering Begins the Journey to Wisdom*, authored by Dr. Kathleen A Brehony, a graduate of our clinical psychology program.

Dr. Brehony not only explicates the transformative power in suffering, but also offers proactive advice, strategies and exercises to help us overcome the consequences of disasters with augmented appreciation of personal blessings, renewed compassion to reach out to others, and restored optimism that our most challenging obstacles can be eliminated.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of this month all classes on our campus will be cancelled. Various events will represent the official university commemoration of “A Day of Remembrance,” and will be devoted to emotional healing. Thus, this review is timely and relevant for our university community. But, since negative emotional events are experienced by everyone and the resultant negative emotions can put people at-risk for unintentional injury, the following suggestions are relevant for every reader of *ISHN*.

### **Consider the Big Picture**

Dr. Brehony reminds us “our lives are a mere blip on the radar screen of the universe” (p.168). She advises us to see our pain within the context of the big picture and realize we all “exist in spiraling cycles of blessings and pain” (p.167), and our suffering will not last forever. With patience and a larger and longer viewpoint, we know better times will come.

### **Find Compassion and Actively Care**

You are compassionate when you not only appreciate and feel the suffering of others, but also reach out to give them aid and support. Dr. Brehony advises us to “consciously, willingly, open our hearts to another’s pain – not from pity or sentimentality, but with a deep desire for connection and relationship” (p.175). But true compassion comes when we use such empathy for others to fuel our motivation to help others – to actively care. From her research, Dr. Brehony concludes that “people who help others are happier than those who don’t” (p.177).

### **Prevent Self-Imposed Suffering**

Industrial injuries and fatalities are relevant here, reflecting the important mission of a safety leader – to help people prevent suffering from unintentional injury.

A person’s self-image is another source of preventable suffering. In other words, much suffering can result from low self-esteem, including drug and alcohol abuse, delinquency and crime, teenage pregnancies, depression, suicide, free-floating anxiety, anorexia, and bulimia. Indeed, it’s been reported the VT killer had very low self-esteem, and self-worth.

Dr. Brehony explains how a healthy self-image can be developed by: a) using visualization and self-talk to raise confidence and self-regard, b) forgiving yourself for your mistakes, c) setting more realistic goals, d) celebrating your strengths and accomplishments, and e) surrounding yourself with supportive and optimistic company.

### **Practice Mindfulness**

In several ISHN columns (July-September 1999; July 2000; June 2004), I have discussed mindfulness as a critical approach to injury prevention. Dr. Brehony advocates being present-centered and immersed in the moment as a way to grow through our pain and suffering. Focusing our attention on the precious present, rather than worrying about the future, allows us to be truly

compassionate of others and to relish and appreciate the miracles of living. Mindfulness also enables personal grieving, which Dr. Brehony claims is key to emotional healing.

### **Grieve**

Dr. Brehony explains “Grief is the natural and normal response to significant loss...as we grieve, it’s not uncommon to be anxious, extremely sad, and sometimes angry – which can lead to sleepless nights or ones filled with nightmares” (p.202). Regardless of the aversiveness of grieving, we should not hide our sadness, but rather be mindful of our pain, and attempt to “find joy amid the sorrow, and comfort for our tears” (p.202).

Dr. Brehony discredits the slogans “time will heal all wounds” and “keep busy and don’t think about it” as credible advice for healing our negative emotions. Instead, give in to the pain, and let yourself feel it. She warns, “If the tears go unshed...the fear of their torment can continue until they are released” (p.206).

Thus, it’s appropriate for our university community to link the slogan “Never Forget” with the tragic campus events on April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007. In our own private moments of reflection, we will never stop grieving for the losses suffered on that day. Acknowledging and honoring our sadness and mourning will enable awareness that we will never again be the same. We become mindful of a new “normal,” with reluctant acceptance but realization that life goes on.

### **Build Relationships**

Here Dr. Brehony supports the concept of relationship building and belongingness, which I have advocated in prior ISHN articles as critical to cultivating an actively-caring culture (e.g., January 1992; June 2006; December 2007). Substantial research documents the beneficial impact of social support on human performance, from enhancing motivation to engage in a challenging task to facilitating recovery from physical illness and injury.

Dr Brehony emphasizes the human need to belong, to feel a sense of family. She advises us to connect frequently with immediate family members, but also to create a family from friends. “Cultivate friendships with people you love and admire, the kind you can open your heart to even with a phone call at three o’clock in the morning” (p.213).

### **In Conclusion**

Since I began contributing a monthly column for ISHN in 1992, this is my first attempt to address emotional healing. I confess; I needed this. I needed this not only because of the VT tragedy, but also to deal with many other mishaps in my life. I’m sure every reader can relate.

I am grateful for the healing insight provided by my former student and now my teacher – Kathleen A. Brehony, Ph.D. Her enlightening and introspective book enables me to derive courage and wisdom from my experiences of personal loss and suffering. And this attempt to glean the gems from her penetrating scholarship enhanced my learning and appreciation. Next month I will discuss six additional ways to heal and benefit from our negative emotions.

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