

## **The Emotional Impact of Tragic Loss: How to Find a Silver Lining**

Negative emotions, including anxiety, anger, guilt and sadness, often have debilitating physical and psychological effects. They suppress our immune system, make us vulnerable to serious illness, and narrow our attention and thinking, thereby limiting our ability to carry out routine activities in a constructive manner. When the negative emotional state is sadness, sorrow or grief, the resultant narrow-mindedness and inactivity can lead to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and severe depression.

My *ISHN* contribution last month reviewed six practical strategies for helping us heal emotionally from the darkest moments of our lives with courage and wisdom. I gleaned those and the six presented here from the profound book by Dr. Kathleen A. Brehony – *After the Darkest Hour: How Suffering Begins the Journey to Wisdom*.

### **Relevance to Industrial Safety**

Is this discussion relevant to occupational safety and health? Of course it is. People deal with negative emotions throughout their lives, and the aftermath can put people at risk for personal injury. Indeed, motivation to take the extra time and inconvenience to guard against preventable suffering can be activated by imagining the long-term emotional impact of a workplace injury.

But serious injuries and fatalities happen, and the crippling emotional consequences to victims and their family and friends put people at-risk for more injury. Let's examine six tactics for building resilience to the emotional aftermath of a tragic loss.

### **Develop Gratitude and Optimism**

Dr. Brehony reminds us how mere irritation and frustration can put us in an unhealthy emotional state. But just as quickly, we can calm down and think ourselves into a positive,

optimistic disposition. How? We count our blessings. We are alive, and there are many people dealing with more tragic circumstances than ours. Consider ALS victims like Dick Sanderson, whose courage and grace I described in my July 2006 contribution to *ISHN*?

Philosopher Robert Solomon claims gratitude is not only “the best answer to the tragedies of life. It is the best approach to life itself.” In fact, researchers found people who wrote down their blessings each day in a diary scored higher on a variety of measures of well-being than those who did not. Furthermore, those who experienced daily gratitude by counting their blessings were more likely to help others – to actively care. Does this suggest a useful intra and interpersonal exercise to practice on a regular basis?

I detailed the benefits of optimism in a prior *ISHN* article (October 1996), emphasizing that optimists expect a worthwhile and positive future and work diligently to achieve such a destiny, armed with the self-fulfilling prophecy. Dr. Brehony distinguishes optimists from pessimists with “Optimism is joyful searching; pessimism is a prison of fear and clutching at illusionary safety” (p.218).

### **Find Inspiration from Courageous Role Models**

From books, films and T.V., people are attracted to heroes. We gain motivation and inspiration by watching lead characters overcome their pain and suffering through their special knowledge, skill, and courage. I have friends who watch movies like “Braveheart” or “Saving Private Ryan” several times to increase their awareness, optimism, and self-motivation.

In Dr. Brehony’s words, “At all times in life, but especially when we’re suffering, our heroes can be companions and illuminate the path as we forge ahead on our treacherous way” (p.220). She tells the story of Helen Keller who overcame her loss of hearing and sight at the age of 19 months to graduate *Cum Laude* from Radcliff College, where she studied Greek, Latin,

German, French, and English. She lectured around the world, bringing inspiration, courage, and hope to people with and without physical and/or emotional challenges. Helen Keller is clearly an inspirational model of triumph over tragedy.

### **Maintain a Sense of Humor**

With personal anecdotes and research evidence, Dr. Brehony discusses the power of humor and laughter in making the best out of the worst situations. Indeed, scientific studies have demonstrated the healing power of laughter, including its capacity to reduce distress, boost our immune system, and ease physical and psychological pain. I discussed the same benefits of a sense of humor in an earlier *ISHN* article (October 1997), and described five basic ways to get people to laugh.

Dr. Brehony's practical advice is straightforward, "Discover what makes *you* laugh and then seek out those people, movies, books, and other activities and fill your life with them" (p.232).

### **Express Your Negative Emotions**

Based on theory, research and her clinical practice, Dr. Brehony makes a strong case for outwardly communicating our pain with verbal and written expression. Such self-expression is especially critical when the loss is sudden or traumatic. In her words, "The pain of suffering, if left unexpressed, incubates over years, decades, even lifetimes, and festers into a growing inner wound that will not heal" (p.231).

Thus, when coworkers are coping with the aftermath of a tragedy, it's important to be an empathic listener of their traumatic stories. Listen to hear as much as possible. The more negative feelings revealed, the greater the emotional healing.

### **Practice Silence, Prayer and Meditation**

Dr. Brehony discusses the power of silence and solitude as “compelling instruments of transformation granting us moments of perfect opportunity to look deeply inside...as our inner wisdom points the way to healing” (p.240). She describes the results of empirical studies that demonstrated physical and psychological benefits of meditation, self-reflection and prayer, including lowered heart rate and blood pressure, reduced distress and pain, slower metabolic rate, and even healing effects on cancer and heart disease.

Given the potential healing powers of mindful silence and meditation, you should include a time for this in a typical workday. Obviously, this can't happen in the midst of multitasking in a noisy work environment. But, how about during a solitary walk at break or lunch, without your cell phone?

### **Develop a Warrior Approach to Life**

This final strategy for healing negative emotions calls for a warrior approach to life with four attributes – awareness, bravery, compassion, and discipline. Such warriors “are not war makers but peace lovers who live mindfully and with a genuineness and courage that are deeply rested in the heart” (p.246).

Warriors look outside and inside themselves to become authentically *aware* of “every moment of experience just as it is, without bias or judgment” (p.248). They have a *brave*, persevering, unconquerable spirit that chooses prevention over reaction with *compassionate* regard for others. Through rigorous self-*discipline* they develop mastery over their own body, mind, and available resources in order to meet the many challenges of their lives. Are these not the ideal characteristics of a safety leader?

### **In Conclusion**

This brief review of evidence-based strategies for growing through pain and suffering represents only a small sampling of the illuminating scholarship of Dr. Kathleen A. Brehony. I am proud to have been her thesis and dissertation advisor more than 25 years ago. Today, she is my teacher, friend, and professional colleague.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.  
Alumni Distinguished Professor, Virginia Tech  
Senior Partner, Safety Performance Solutions

Dr. Geller and his partners at Safety Performance Solutions (SPS) help companies worldwide apply human dynamics to industrial safety and beyond. Coastal Training and Technologies Corporation has published Dr. Geller's books on People-Based Safety, including his latest: *Leading People-Based Safety*. For more information, please log on to [www.people-based-safety.com](http://www.people-based-safety.com); call SPS at 540-951-7233; or Coastal at 1-800-767-7703, ext 3313.