



# **When a Person who Abuses Family Members Dies: How do the Bereaved Respond?**

Brenda Adams

Presented at

Dignity 2015: Response-Based Practice in Action

Hawkes Bay, New Zealand

April 8th – 11th, 2015

# Response-Based Contextual Analysis

(Bonnah, Coates, Richardson, & Wade, 2014)

In order to understand the “situational logic” (Scott, 1990, p. ix; Wade, 1999, p. 156) of people’s responses, we must develop detailed accounts of their circumstances and interactions.

- Social and material conditions
- Situation and interaction
- Offender actions
- Victim responses
- Social responses
- Responses to social responses

# Response-Based Ideas and Grief Therapy

- Obtain detailed information about context, situations, interactions, and social responses.
- Focus on responses before, during, and after the loss rather than on stages or phases of grief or symptoms of a disorder.
- How do those who are bereaved respond mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually to their losses, associated circumstances, and social responses?

# Reformulating Responses

Reformulate worrisome or painful responses as appropriate and healthy e.g.,

- “Depression” may be reformulated as grief,
- “Numbness” as a way of moderating emotional pain, and
- “Inability to concentrate” as selective concentration.

# Using Situational Logic to Alleviate Guilt

- We may then formulate the situational logic of their responses.
- Feelings of guilt or shame e.g., thinking they did not do enough to prevent the death or ease suffering prior to death, may be alleviated.

# How Often do Counsellors Encounter People Dealing with the Death of a Family Member Who Abused Them?

- How many people have experienced abuse/violence perpetrated by a family member?
- How often does the family member who perpetrated the abuse die before the person they abused?
- How many people subjected to abuse by a family member seek counselling after the death of the person who abused them?

# Frequency of Violence by a Family Member

- As many as 50% of young people under the age of 18 have experienced a physical or sexualized assault (Briere & Elliott, 2003; Finkelhor, Ormrod, Turner, & Hamby, 2005).
- 24% of reported physical or sexualized assaults against minors were committed by a family member, usually a parent (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2008, p. 26).
- 25-29% of women and 7.6% of men have been assaulted by a spouse or ex-spouse (Johnson & Sacco, 1995; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000).

# Abuse of Older Adults

- The frequency of elder abuse ranges from 2% to 10% (Lachs & Pillemer, 2004, p. 1264).
- Of cases reported to police, 18% are committed by an adult child or current or former spouse (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2008).

# The Professional Literature

- According to Monahan (2003), “Little information exists regarding the issues of bereavement for a sexual abuse survivor when the decedent was the abuser” (p. 641).
- The same is true for other forms of violence and abuse (Monahan, 2003; Sofka, 1999).

## Contextual Factors to Consider

- Did the bereaved disclose/report the abuse/violence?
- Who knows about the abuse and how did they respond?
- How do others respond to the death and to the family member who was abused?
- What are the social expectations around participation in bereavement practices e.g., family gatherings, funeral, burial or spreading ashes, memorial ceremonies, etc.

# How Does the Person Who was Abused Respond?

- “Perhaps grief and loss issues related to childhood abuse are best described as a type of disenfranchised grief” (Sofka, 1999, pp. 125-126).
- Doka (1989) defines disenfranchised grief as “grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported” (p. 4).

# If the Abuse was not Disclosed/Reported, the Person Who Was Abused May . . .

- Feel relief, not grief;
- Disclose the abuse for the first time;
- Experience renewed grief, anger, and other feelings related to the abuse;
- Grieve loss of possibility that the person who abused them will acknowledge what they did or apologize;
- Be uncomfortable listening to others eulogize the deceased;
- Pretend to agree with positive statements made about the deceased;

## The Person Who was Abused May . . .

- Attempt to conceal their true feelings in order to be present with others who are grieving;
- Feel isolated as they deal with complex responses to the death;
- Avoid those who are grieving, and not attend the funeral;
- Experience a mixture of positive and negative memories of the deceased and truly grieve the loss; or
- Have come to terms with the abuse and feel at peace.

# If the Abuse is Public Knowledge, the Person Who was Abused May . . .

- Be blamed for the abuse or for reporting the abuse;
- Be blamed for the death e.g., if the deceased died by suicide following a report;
- Feel guilty and blame themselves for the death;
- Find others deny/avoid/ignore that part of the deceased's history;
- Want to talk about the abuse/violence and their responses to the death, but find others unwilling to listen or at a loss to support complex responses;

## The Person Who was Abused May . . .

- Feel loss and grief that others are puzzled by;
- Want to focus on positive aspects of the deceased's history, but find others only want to focus on the abuse/violence;
- Find understanding and support from friends and/or family.

# A Response-Based Approach

- Elicit relevant history of abuse/violence e.g., the abuse, responses to the abuse, social responses, and responses to social responses.
- Elicit relevant history related to the death e.g., larger social contexts; immediate social situations and interactions; and social responses.
- Elicit information about the client's responses to the death, to surrounding circumstances and events, and to social responses.
- Acknowledge complexity and formulate situational logic.

# Sample Questions

- Would you be willing to tell me a little about how he/she abused you? (When, where, social context, etc.)
- When he did that, how did you respond?
- Did you tell anyone about the abuse?
- How did they respond?
- How did you respond to that?
- Would you be willing to tell me a little about the circumstances of his/her death?
- What circumstances led up to the death?
- How did you find out about the death?

# Sample Questions

- How did you respond when you found out about the death?
- What happened after he/she died? How did you respond in the days (weeks, years) following the death?
- How did others (family, friends) respond to the death?
- How did they respond to you?
- How did you respond to them?

## Case Example 1

### Violence by a Father Toward all Family Members

Jane\*: I don't want to talk about my father, but I know I need to do something to deal with my grief.

Brenda: Have you talked with anyone about him?

Jane: Yeah. In the days after he died, I tried to reminisce with my family about happy memories of him.

Brenda: How did they respond?

\*Not her real name

# Social Responses & Situational Logic

Jane: They changed the subject, walked out of the room, or reminded me how violent he was.

Brenda: It sounds like it's not that you don't *want* to talk about your father; you *tried* to talk about him with your family. It sounds like it hasn't been *safe* for you to talk about him. When you tried, people walked away, changed the subject, or reminded you how violent he was.

Jane: Ohhh! I hadn't thought of it that way! I did talk with my mother a few days ago and we both ended up crying. I worry about upsetting her. She's had a lot of chest pain since my dad died and the doctor said it's her heart.

# Situational Logic

Brenda: So you want to protect her by not talking about your dad?

Jane: Yeah, that's right.

Brenda: So it hasn't been safe for you to talk with *anyone* about your dad.

*Jane agreed and began describing events surrounding her father's illness and death.*

## Case Example 2

# Addressing Guilt Following a Father's Death

- Catherine\* was in her late 50s.
- Physician referred after assessing her for chest pain and intrusive thoughts and feelings related to her father's death four months earlier.
- Catherine expressed feelings of guilt related to her responses when she heard her father was near death thousands of miles away.
- She did not want to be with him.

\*Not her real name

# Responses to her Father's Death

- All flights were full due to spring break and it took two days to arrange a flight from another city.
- She felt comfortable, accepting, even happy, with the delay.
- On her way to the airport, she received a call saying her father had passed away.
- She continued with her plans to shop before flying.
- She cried only briefly at the funeral.

# Historical Situation and Interactions

- Catherine described her father as demanding and verbally abusive, never offering her a word of praise until shortly before his death when she found a care home for him and he said, “This is just right.”
- Withheld money from the family while amassing sizable savings for himself.
- When his third wife was dying, he refused to take Catherine to the hospital after an 11:00 p.m. call saying his wife was near death. He had said, “We’ll go in the morning!”
- Catherine could not go by herself because of an injured ankle.
- His wife died during the night.
- Catherine took care of his financial matters and regularly flew to visit him.

# Formulating Situational Logic

- Acknowledged her choice to take the high road and support her father despite his abusiveness.
- Proposed that her reluctance to be at her father's death bed was a form of resistance.
- Suggested she may not have wanted to give him what he refused to give to his third wife.
- She said that made sense, though she had not thought of it that way, but he was probably too out-of-it to get the point – he would have just thought she could not get there.
- I suggested that allowed her to resist without being openly hurtful.
- This could also protect her from others' judgements.

# Additional Background Disclosed

- At age 13 he slapped her hard, knocking her glasses to the floor.
- He turned and walked away.
- She picked up her glasses and broke them and said, “See what you did to my glasses?”
- He tied them together and made her wear them for months before buying new ones.
- She said, “So you see, resistance is futile.”
- Stopping violence or maintaining dignity?
- “I hadn’t thought of it that way. I only thought I was being bad.”
- Importance of considering context.

# Responses to Counselling

- “I can talk to my friends, but they wouldn’t put things together the way you did. I feel very relieved.”
- During subsequent sessions Catherine shared a huge sense of relief associated with understanding the motivation for her actions.
- The covert nature of her actions provided her with the option of selectively deciding who to share her feelings with.

# Email Message

Now that I've read this several times, I can see that you've shown me to be a very clever person capable of helping myself in a crunch, even if I don't realize at the time what I'm doing or why I'm doing it. It boosts my self-esteem to know that my therapist thinks this about me. It reinforces my suspicion that I have an inner voice that's worth listening to, something I did realize (finally!) sometime in my late forties and have tried to pay attention to ever since.

## Follow-up Email Several Months Later

Last Sunday was the day of the unveiling ceremony I told you about . . . the graveside service that I had not wanted to attend. After discussing this with you, I began telling the members of my family who expected me to be there that I would not be coming. I told them it was just too much of a time-consuming trip for me to travel [so far] for a ceremony that would last maybe 15 minutes. As if to excuse my absence, my niece did some research and discovered that an unveiling is not a traditional ceremony; in fact, it is quite modern. That was all I needed to excuse myself and not feel any guilt at all.

# Follow-up Email Continued

On Sunday I did turn my thoughts to the others who were there and thought about my father, etc. I noticed the next day that I was having some of those heart thumps that brought me to you in the first place, but they were not as strong or as long-lasting as the ones I was feeling months ago. I've concluded that they are stress-triggered, and probably specifically by thoughts of loss, fear, and death. At any rate, I'm extremely relieved by my decision to stay home and that I found the strength to say, "No," in the face of pressure and expectations.

## Case Example 3

### Violence by a Cousin - Not Disclosed

- Julie\* had been assaulted and raped by her cousin in a prison called residential school. He died several years later.
- She felt guilty that she had “let him do it,” never told her family what he had done, and felt relief when he died.
- She felt regret that she had never talked to him about it.
- We reviewed the context, circumstances, and assaults in detail; his actions and her responses; and we developed the situational logic of her responses to his aggression and her decision not tell anyone.
- \*Not her real name

# After He Died

- She felt relief, but hid it. She felt safer with him gone.
- Family members said good things about him. She pretended to agree, but inside she screamed, “That’s not what he’s like!”
- She also felt sadness. She would never be able to ask him, “How come?” and “Who did it to you?”
- “I suffered in silence with my grief. So much I wanted to say but couldn’t.”
- She wanted to miss the funeral, but did go, and was relieved when it was over.

# Acknowledge Complexity and Formulate Situational Logic

“I was asked to help with his clothes. Because we went to boarding school together they said I knew him better. I was nervous. I wanted to do good by him. At the same time I was glad he was gone. I battled with that cousin thing, still do today. It would have been better if he wasn't related so I could be really mad at him. If he was a stranger I would have filed charges against him. I would have told my family. BUT, he was my cousin.”

# Responses to Counselling

- After a few counselling sessions, Julie told me she began feeling compassion for her cousin. (Something must have happened to him and he could not tell anyone.)
- She then remembered good things about him e.g., things he had done to help and protect her.
- Next came memories of happy childhood events. She told her children and grandchildren about these.
- I proposed that she was rewriting her life story based on a fuller memory.
- She agreed and said she was also rewriting the legacy she was passing on to her children and grandchildren.

## Follow up Email Message

As time goes by I find myself more accepting of my experience. The pain is still there, but it gets easier. I now have good positive memories coming up, that were blocked by the not-so-pleasant memories. Its like a shift of some sort. . . .

## Follow Up

Now, when I attend funerals, gatherings, I don't even think of him anymore. My abuser. My cousin, my poor cousin. What did he go through? He never got to talk about it or heal from it. I am in a place of understanding, and no blame, or shame here.

# Follow Up

Life looks different through the eyes of a residential school survivor and a survivor of many things. The sun is shining, the trees and flowers are blooming, the river looks calm, and the mountains stand proud. A new outlook on life.

# References

- Bonnah, S., Coates, L., Richardson, C., & Wade, A. (2014). *Response-Based contextual analysis in cases of violence*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Briere, J., & Elliot, D. M. (2003). Prevalence and psychological sequelae of self-reported childhood physical and sexual abuse in a general population sample of men and women. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 27(10), 1205-1222.
- Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. (2008). *Family violence in Canada: A statistical profile 2008*. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-224-x/85-224-x2008000-eng.pdf>

# References

- Doka, K. J. (1989). *Disenfranchised grief: Recognizing hidden sorrow*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books.
- Finkelhor, D., Ormrod, R., Turner, H., & Hamby, S. L. (2005). The victimization of children and youth: A comprehensive national survey. *Child Maltreatment*, 10(1), 5-25.
- Johnson, H., & Sacco, V. F. (1995). Researching violence against women: Statistics Canada's national survey. *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 37(3), 281-304.
- Lachs, M. S., & Pillemer, K. (2004). Elder abuse. *The Lancet*, 364, 1263-1272.

# References

- Monahan, K. (2003). Death of an abuser: Does the memory linger on? *Death Studies*, (27), 641-651.
- Scott, J. C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sofka, C. J. (1999). For the butterflies I never chased, I grieve: Incorporating grief and loss issues in treatment with survivors of childhood sexual abuse. *Journal of Personal and Interpersonal Loss*, (4), 125-148.
- Tjaden, P., & Thoennes, N. (2000). *Extent, nature, and consequences of intimate partner violence: Findings from the National Violence Against Women Survey*. U.S. Department of Justice. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/181867.pdf>

# References

Wade, A. (1999). *Resistance to interpersonal violence: Implications for the practice of therapy*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk2/ftp02/NQ47298.pdf>