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Survivor Guilt

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GLOSSARY

guilt An internal emotional judgement (an aspect of conscience) of having been bad or doing wrong to another.

survivor A person who has lived through a trauma.

trauma An experience in which one's life has been grossly threatened and out of which a variety of biological, psychological, and social wounds and scars result.

Survivor guilt is a mental pain that results from the appraisal that a person has done wrong by surviving a trauma. This is because the survivor ties his or her own survival to the death of others. Survivor guilt is sometimes called death guilt. In common usage it subsumes priority guilt, where the implication is having willfully shoved another aside in a struggle for life. Further, although often present with it, survivor guilt should be distinguished from survivor shame, where the whole person is judged as unworthy rather than just the person's actions.

I. HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF SURVIVOR GUILT

Survivor guilt as a clinical entity was emphasized for the first time in Holocaust literature in the 1960s. Psychiatrists such as Krystal and Niederland were struck with the ubiquity of intense unabating guilt among their Holocaust survivor patients. Survivor guilt came to be quickly recognized in other traumatic situations too. They included the Hiroshima atom bomb, combat, disasters, and civilian bereavement. Indeed, it can occur in all traumatic situations.

A special form of survivor guilt may be said to occur in rescuers and helpers who blame themselves for not having saved those for whom they saw themselves as responsible. More subtle forms can occur, for instance, in clinicians who feel guilt for their well-being in the face of their patients' sufferings.

II. MORAL FEATURES OF SURVIVOR GUILT

The most striking feature of survivor guilt is its moral judgment of self-blame. It is directed to one's perceived undeserved survival in contrast to others' deaths. It is often stated that the dead should be alive instead of oneself. This may be enhanced when a person was saved by another who died.

A common subtype of survivor guilt relates to not

having saved others. The implication is that survivors could have, should have, but due to selfishness did not save others, but instead only caused suffering and death. This feeling is enhanced if one's usual role, such as husband, parent, or rescuer, was to protect those who died or if one did indeed put one's survival ahead of others.

However, a striking feature of survivor guilt is the contrast between the torment of self-blame of survivors and their innocence by any objective criteria. For instance, Holocaust survivors often blamed themselves for not following or saving their murdered loved ones, when objectively they were torn apart at gunpoint or through physical force. Children blamed themselves for the deaths of their parents while they were hidden and survived. The Holocaust taught the paradox that victims were prone to survivor guilt, whereas perpetrators rationalized their guilt.

Unjustified survivor guilt occurs in all traumatic situations. Medical staff may blame themselves for not saving unsavable patients. A child may grow up with unwarranted guilt for parental death or unwanted separations.

III. SENSE AND PURPOSE OF SURVIVOR GUILT

Observations in acute phases of traumatic situations indicate that survivor guilt is an unpleasant evolutionary social cue (which may be reinforced by others' anger and blame), which can only be appeased through helping others. For instance, in a disaster, those whose houses survived appeased their guilt by sheltering those whose houses were destroyed. Survivor guilt thus helps to preserve as many people (or genes) in the community as possible.

Later survivor guilt may be practically less useful, although it may prime reparative action for later similar traumatic circumstances. It may also preserve retrospective hope that "If onlies. . ." may yet be able to be executed. Further, Danieli suggests that the guilt is a buffer against moral chaos and existential helplessness, as it preserves some moral order in the universe. Finally, the guilt maintains close links to the dead.

IV. RANGE OF MANIFESTATIONS OF SURVIVOR GUILT

If survivor guilt is appeased by effective rescue of others, it may be sensed as a temporary stress. If it fails and becomes part of a trauma, it is lived and relived as part of the wounds and scars of the trauma. The following biological, psychological, and social manifestations may occur singly or in a variety of combinations.

A. Physiological Responses

Thus far the physiological accompaniments of survivor guilt have not been delineated.

B. Psychological Responses

1. Emotion

Survivor guilt is one of the most painful human emotions. It may be felt as both mental anguish and a physical heart-wrenching pain in the chest directed toward the dead, but turned angrily back on oneself.

2. Cognitions

Poignant events may return in thoughts, ruminations, images, dreams, and flashbacks. Cognitive schemas and meanings develop, such as that one is irresponsible, a destroyer of life.

3. Defenses

Intense pain and unacceptable meanings of survivor guilt may be central in defense formations. Psychic numbing, dissociation, and repression may fragment coherent awareness. Identification may lead to physical symptoms similar to the ones the dead suffered. Displacement may lead to blaming others. Sublimation may lead to a devotion of saving others.

C. Social Responses

In acute situations, people may vacillate between appeasing survivor guilt by helping others and other survival options. After the acute phase, anguished responses such as wringing of hands may alternate with numbed withdrawal as defenses are established. Over time, guilt may be displayed indirectly, such

as by playing down one's survivorship and avoiding enjoyment and vitality to avoid the imagined blaming finger, "Why did you survive?" Thus, life's joys exacerbate the guilt. Sublimatory activity may be channeled through helping work and professions.

Specific social settings may have characteristic responses. For instance, bereaved parents often withdraw to extremes, and emotional numbing admixed with intense blame and self-blame often result in divorce.

D. Associated Clinical Features

Survivor guilt may be associated with other judgments, such as shame and injustice. The sense of injustice may revolve around having been unfair to others, but also for having been put in unfair situations.

Survivor guilt may interfere with grieving and is often at the kernel of unresolved grief and depression. Hence it may need to be resolved before the grieving process can proceed.

V. TREATMENT OF SURVIVOR GUILT

Prevention of survivor guilt is part of the rationale for early disaster intervention, grief therapy, and debriefing. Its resolution is also a common goal in later psychotherapies. The first principle of treatment of

survivor guilt is its recognition. Next, thorough investigation of the facts of the circumstances reveals its objective irrationality. This and its evolutionary and psychological senses are explained. Alternative hopeful cognitive views are explored, which lead to thawing of defenses. The emotional pain released is identified, processed, and assimilated in the context of an empathic, moral therapeutic relationship. The survivor's own morality is retrieved with the realization that past circumstances, not the survivor, were irrational and bad. Seeing oneself as a victim and not as a perpetrator allows the survivor to grieve losses and to achieve new hopeful meanings. The survivor now reclaims a purposeful life.

See Also the Following Articles

CONCENTRATION CAMP SURVIVORS; HOLOCAUST, STRESS EFFECTS OF; HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS, EXPERIENCES OF

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