

## Psychological And Emotional Issues in the Aftermath of a Collision

(Excerpted from Jill Franklin's keynote address at M.A.D.D. Canada's National Victims Support Conference, April 2007)

After being hit by a car while crossing a Vancouver street, I had 14 hours of surgery and was in the hospital for two weeks and bedridden for another month. I spent another six months in a wheelchair, but a year later I was walking again, limping along on a cane.

A mild brain injury changed my life more than my obvious injuries, affecting how I think and function. ICBC didn't accept that I'd had a brain injury until the morning of my personal injury trial. In the meantime, I was put under surveillance and every aspect of my life investigated. The process was demeaning and humiliating – it was intended to be.

After my case settled, I devoted several years to researching and writing the *Auto Accident Survivor's Guide*. I wanted to make the aftermath of traffic collisions less traumatic for others. Turning my tragedies into something that benefits others has empowered me. By giving you the knowledge you need, you'll be empowered, too.

What my near-death experience taught me is that it's more frightening to learn about what happened to someone you love than to experience the trauma yourself. As a bereaved mother – my son was murdered two years before my accident - this was an important lesson for me to learn. When you're in shock, you don't feel pain. The situation seems unreal, as if you're watching a movie. You're too detached from what's happening to be disturbed.

I remember the lights of the van that hit me. I remember flying through the air, convinced I was dying. But I wasn't frightened. Whatever was happening was fine with me. I felt totally removed from it, indifferent to it.

Billy's murder traumatized me. My accident traumatized my husband. When he read the note the police taped to our door telling him I'd been hit by a car, he drove to the hospital screaming. I barely remember what happened after I hit the ground or in the days that followed. My husband will never forget the things I don't remember – they were traumatic for him. You may be more traumatized by an accident that injured or killed someone close to you than the injured (or deceased) person. I'm not just saying this to comfort you. I know from my own experiences that it's true.

Mourning someone's death or catastrophic injury - or the death of who you were yourself before a traffic collision or serious injury - can take years. You never *really* get over it. It remains a core part of you. But it eventually stops defining who you are. I'm the mother of a

murdered child. I have permanent deficits from a brain injury. But I'm also a wife, mother, grandmother, writer, advocate. More than my tragedies define me.

Not having time to say goodbye to someone you love can be incredibly painful. It's never too late to do this, though. You can write a letter to the person who died telling them everything in your heart - not just your love for them, but your pain and regrets as well. Ask them to forgive you for times when you may have hurt them or failed them. Times you weren't there for them when they needed you. Use your letter to forgive them, too, for times when they may have hurt you or others.

In psychologist Kathleen O'Hara's wonderful book, *A Grief Like No Other: Surviving the Violent Death of Someone You Love*, she talks about eight qualities that can help you move through the grieving process: courage, hope, optimism, humour, patience, joy, spirituality (or faith), and compassion. Read her book. I highly recommend it.

By learning to gain power over what happened, what happened won't destroy you. Healing requires time, patience and effort. Grieving for what you've lost is painful. It's hard work. But things *will* get better. Life *will* be good for you again.

Please remember: When I talk about grieving, I don't only mean grieving someone's death. I'm also speaking to survivors of catastrophic injuries and their families. The grieving process is the same.

Impaired (or reckless) driving is a criminal act. You don't have to accept it - why should you? It's unacceptable. But you need to acknowledge what happened.

Denial can be an important coping strategy at first. It helps get you through the rough early times. But when you continue to deny what happened, you prevent yourself from healing. Sooner or later, you need to acknowledge the truth - as painful as this is.

For years, I denied I had on-going deficits from a brain injury. My books have been published all over the world. I'm an intellectual. How could I be brain damaged? There was no way I could accept that. I hid it from everyone – most of all, myself.

But I couldn't learn to compensate for my lost skills until I acknowledged that I'd lost them. I needed to learn how to function again. To re-train my brain. Re-evaluate who I am, and adjust my goals accordingly.

It's not healthy – or helpful – to ignore the reality of what happened or your feelings about it. Being 'brave' or 'above it all' is a form of denial. To move beyond this stage, you need to give yourself permission to be angry, vulnerable, fearful, depressed. These are natural, healthy responses to tragedy. Your whole world has been shattered. *Of course*

you're angry and in pain - how could you not be? If you're *not* in emotional turmoil, you may still be in denial.

You need to confront your loss and face the full intensity of your pain. Otherwise, it will go on haunting you. Causing physical problems. Emotional and psychological problems. Interfering with your relationships, work, sleep.

Don't drink or take pills to numb yourself. Don't try to escape from your pain. You need to embrace it and feel it deeply to move through the grieving process. Grieving is a gift you give yourself. Only by grieving can you get your life in balance again emotionally. Allow your emotions to surface. Accept them - and express them.

Don't be afraid to cry. You won't drown in your tears. Crying is healing, cleansing. For most people, it's an essential part of grieving. Even if you haven't cried since you were 5 years old, let yourself cry - it's important. Crying can help you move *into* your pain so you can move beyond it.

Don't expect your grief to disappear quickly. There are no shortcuts to grieving. No right amount of time to grieve, and no right or wrong way do it. You may be on an emotional rollercoaster ride for years. But you *will* come out on the other side. Nothing lasts forever. Not even grief.

Talking about what happened and expressing your feelings about it will help you recover. You need people around who will listen to you, no matter how many times you repeat the 'ins and outs' of what happened or how many different ways you need to tell it. People who can listen to you without making judgments or trying to tell you what *really* happened or what you *should* feel. People who will hold you when you cry if you need them to.

If you don't have people around to support you – I didn't when Billy was killed; we'd just moved to BC – you can pour out your pain on paper like I did while my husband was at work. I spent my days writing and weeping. I'll talk more about cathartic writing later.

Even if you have many relatives and friends nearby, they may stop being there for you just when you need them the most. If this happens, ask your doctor to recommend a psychologist who does trauma or bereavement counseling. People in support groups may also be able to suggest the name of someone who's helped them. Talk to the people at M.A.D.D. You don't have go through your grieving process alone, but you *do* have to go through it.

Let's talk about rage. Both justified and unjustified rage. Rage at an impaired or reckless driver. At yourself. Even at a loved one who died. Rage at everyone who's giving you a hard time, whether it's the police or RCMP, reporters, insurance adjusters, lawyers, judges, government officials. Rage at a senseless tragedy that should never have happened.

Bottling up your rage is destructive. It can lead to depression, insomnia and a host of physical problems. Unexpressed rage becomes a poison inside you. It can cause explosive outbursts you can't control, or passive-aggressive behaviour that ruins your relationships. You need to learn how to express your rage in a safe way so it doesn't take over your life.

Expressing your anger and rage doesn't mean lashing out at others, even when they may deserve it. First figure out what situations trigger your anger, then ask someone else to deal with these situations whenever possible. An advocate or lawyer, for example, can talk to the police, media or an insurer so you don't have to do this.

Your breathing changes and your body tenses up when you're getting angry. You can learn to use your body's early anger signals to warn yourself that you're about to lose it. Before you do or say anything that might harm you or others, walk away from the situation - take a "Time Out" like kids do. Use slow, even breaths to calm down, and affirmations to remind yourself that you're all right. "I'm okay. Everything is okay. I'm okay."

Writing is a great way to release anger. You can write out your anger in a journal or notebook. Turn it into a poem. It doesn't have to rhyme or make sense. The ICBC defense lawyer's dirty tricks in court incensed me so much that I hated him almost as much as I hate the thug who killed Billy. For weeks, I was consumed with rage. I couldn't think about anything else. Then I wrote a *really* nasty poem about the lawyer. The poem was my sword. It empowered me. Once I'd written it, my rage disappeared.

Write angry letters to the impaired driver - but *don't* mail them! They're for you, not the driver. Write to everyone you're angry at, or have ever been angry at. Anyone who's ever enraged you. Spill out your rage on paper. Get it out of your system. When you're done, tear the paper in tiny pieces and flush them down the toilet or burn them.

Hit a pillow (or scream into a pillow) for ½ hour every day to release your anger. Exercise hard at the gym. Put on music and shake your body vigorously, letting angry sounds come out. Keep doing this until you're too tired to go on. Then close your eyes, put your hands on your chest, and slowly breathe in and out, watching your lungs fill with air, then empty. Feel yourself slowly relax as you breathe in and out. Remind yourself that things *will* get better. Life *will* be good again.

Anger is trapped energy. You can put your anger to good use by getting involved with impaired driving initiatives or campaigns that focus on social or political issues you feel should be addressed. While it's not necessary to become an activist, you *do* need to find appropriate outlets for your anger. Create art out of it. Paint. Dance. Sing. Play musical instruments. Write nasty poetry.

Talk to a therapist about your feelings. Don't ignore them. Respect them. They're part of who you are now.

### **Ways to deal with angry:**

- Avoid people and situations that triggers your anger.
- Become aware of how your breathing changes and your body tenses when you get angry.
- Use your body's early anger signals as a warning system.
- Walk away from people and situations that anger you before you 'lose it'.
- Take a 'Time out' as soon as you feel you're 'losing it'.
- Don't return to a stressful situation until you've calmed down.
- Don't take out your anger on others.

### **Be careful not to express rage towards:**

- people close to you
- children and the elderly
- teachers, employers, co-workers
- people whose help you may need:
  - the police or RCMP
  - reporters
  - emergency room and hospital staff
  - doctors, lawyers, insurers, judges, jurors
  - government agency staff
  - gatekeepers to benefit programs
- medical assessors & detectives hired by an insurer
- criminal investigators

### **Bottled up anger can cause:**

- physical problems
- depression
- insomnia
- passive-aggressive behaviour
- loss of meaningful relationships
- sexual dysfunction
- substance abuse

When someone you care about is seriously injured or killed - or you're seriously injured - it's natural to feel depressed. But when depression takes over your life and becomes your defining characteristic, you need professional help.

Some signs of clinical depression? Not sleeping well - or sleeping all the time. Not eating. Having little energy or interest in anything. Not feeling or caring about anyone or anything anymore. Neglecting your personal hygiene. Ignoring the needs of people who depend on you. Letting your responsibilities slide.

Don't be afraid to admit that you're depressed. Admitting it is the first step to getting help. Even if you're tired of talking about what happened, find a psychologist who's trained in trauma or bereavement counseling to talk to, preferably someone who works with auto accident victims and survivors.

Don't rely on alcohol or drugs to make you feel better. Too many doctors medicate people when what they really need is counseling. Anti-depressants aren't the answer, at least not the whole answer. People with brain injuries shouldn't take them at all unless they're carefully monitored by a psychiatrist who specializes in brain injury. Your family physician may not be aware of this. Most doctors know very little about brain injuries.

Here are some things *you* should know: *Any* collision can cause a brain injury - and *any* brain injury (even a mild one) can have lifelong consequences. You don't have to lose consciousness to have a brain injury.

Collisions cause 50,000 brain injuries a year in Canada. Despite this, brain injury is routinely overlooked in emergency rooms and hospitals. Even diagnosed brain injuries may be ignored when there are other serious injuries. This can lead to secondary brain damage, especially during surgery. Medical errors like this shouldn't happen, but they do.

If you or anyone close to you was in a collision, *please* educate yourself about brain injury symptoms so you recognize them when you see them. Don't rely on doctors to diagnose a mild brain injury or know how to treat it. Read my article on mild traumatic brain injury in the *BC Medical Journal*. There's also tons of information on brain injury in the *Auto Accident Survivor's Guide*. Take a look at this.

You need to be pro-active and advocate for treatment, even if this means educating your doctors. The sooner you get treatment for a brain injury, the more likely it is that you'll fully recover.

And *please*, if you or someone you care about is severely depressed, or is depressed for a long time, get professional help! The sooner clinical depression is treated,

the less likely it is to become chronic. Unless you actively advocate for good healthcare, you may not get it.

Does everyone here know what survivor's guilt is? It means to feel guilty for surviving when someone else didn't. Or to feel guilty that you're okay when someone else was injured, or could have been. Even when you're not directly involved in an accident, you may feel responsible for it in some way.

Agonizing over "what-if's" can drive you and everyone else crazy. If Billy hadn't taken a trip to San Francisco when he did, he'd still be alive. If I hadn't visited my daughter at her graduate school when I did, I wouldn't have been hit by a car on my way home.

Even if your survivor's guilt is as irrational as this, it's important not to ignore it. You need to acknowledge it before you can get rid of it. A psychologist who works with trauma survivors can help you resolve your guilt feelings in a healthy way.

"Secondary wounding" refers to the deep psychological damage that insensitive people and inflexible bureaucracies can cause. It hurts. And it occurs repeatedly after traffic collisions.

People that you expect to understand how frightened and anxious you are - rescue workers, the police or RCMP, emergency-room and hospital staff - may be too over-worked or stressed-out to pay attention to you. You may be ignored. Your questions unanswered. Legitimate concerns dismissed. Necessary treatment denied. Even this is just the beginning.

The people and institutions you turn to for help may be unsupportive as well: relatives, friends, health-care providers, lawyers, insurers, government agencies, the courts. Most insensitivity comes from ignorance. People who have never been in your situation may not understand what you're going through. Other people may have their own agendas or an unconscious desire to hurt you. You may become a focus of someone's anger when they don't know who else to blame - or you may be blamed for what happened so other people don't blame themselves. Even your grief may be seen as an attempt to gain sympathy and attention.

Lawyers, insurers and government agencies have their own agendas. Insurers have a vested interest in downplaying the consequences of collisions. Adjusters have a vested interest in paying out as little money in claims as possible. (Keeping claims costs low earns them bonuses and promotions.)

You may be investigated like you're a criminal because you were injured. Someone who was killed in a collision may be blamed for what happened even when this clearly isn't

true. Every aspect of a deceased person's life may be investigated to limit the money paid to the survivors in a wrongful death suit. The more money at stake, the more thorough and intrusive detective investigations usually are.

It can be painful to listen to negative things being said about yourself (or a deceased person) in court. But unless you're willing to accept a settlement offer that may not be fair to you or your family, you may need to take a claim for compensation to trial.

You can't avoid all secondary wounding, but the more you know about the situations you're likely to encounter, the less the medical-legal-insurance system will grind you down.

Many of you have seen for yourselves how family dynamics can change after a serious injury or impaired driving collision. The family member who always seemed most resilient may be the most troubled now and need the most support. The person who seemed the most vulnerable may now be the one to comfort everyone else. Anything is possible - and what seems true on the surface may not be true underneath.

All families react differently to a tragedy. The only certainty is that things will change. Shifting patterns of relationships within the family can cause new conflicts and hurt feelings. This is especially hard to deal with when your whole world has been shattered.

Even when individual family members are seeing a psychologist, psychiatrist or other counselor for treatment, family therapy may be warranted. A family therapist can help your family adjust to the changes that are happening, so 'what comes next' is as beneficial as possible for every family member. Family therapy isn't a luxury. It's important.

The question for many of you may not be whether counseling is helpful - it's wondering who will pay for it. You may be entitled to financial compensation through a tort claim for damages. This is a claim for compensation from someone whose negligence or wrong-doing has harmed you. As part of a wrongful death suit - or a tort claim against an at-fault driver - you can request money to cover therapy costs. While no-fault accident benefits sometimes cover therapy costs for family members, you may have to advocate strongly to get this.

Filing a legal suit may be the last thing you want to think about when you're grieving, but it's something you need to deal with sooner, not later. Unless you file a legal suit on time, you'll lose your right forever to do this. You need to protect yourself and your family. You also need to know how to protect yourself with the lawyer who represents you.

Understanding the medical-legal-insurance system will put *you* in control so you can deal with the situations that arise from a position of strength and empowerment. You won't be a victim of the 'system', as too many people are.

Help is out there, whether it comes from books like mine or Kathleen O'Hara's, or from organizations like M.A.D.D. and Compassionate Friends of Canada. Join a support group even if you're not normally a group joiner. No one can walk in your shoes, but people who have walked down similar paths can give you help, and hope.

Relatives, friends and neighbours can help you with practical things like taking your kids to school or researching the names of good lawyers. People in support groups, relatives, friends, a psychologist, trauma counselor or bereavement counselor can listen to you tell and re-tell your story, and hold you when you cry.

Don't be afraid to ask for help, and don't be embarrassed that you need it. Asking for help isn't a sign of weakness. It's a sign of strength. It takes intelligence to recognize that you need help and courage to ask for it. You're not superhuman, no one is. By allowing other people to help you, you're giving something precious to them, too.

**What relatives, friends and neighbours can help you with:**

- laundry, mail preparation & clean-up, marketing, babysitting
- taking your kids to and from school
- making sure the teachers know what happened & getting feedback on how your kids are doing
- arranging for a housecleaner or doing light cleaning
- making sure you eat properly and get enough sleep
- signing you up for yoga classes, massages, a haircut
- going jogging or to the gym with you to make sure you exercise regularly
- researching local support groups – and going with you to meetings
- getting you helpful books & videos
- preparing a list of helpful websites for you

**A close relative or friend can help:**

- make funeral arrangements
- locate documents: wills, life insurance policies, pensions, RRSPs
- research benefits: employment, government, insurance
- get benefit application forms – fill them out with you – mail them - follow up periodically
- set up medical and rehab appointments for you / make sure you go
- contact insurers / go with you to meet insurance adjusters / take notes
- contact lawyers / arrange preliminary interviews / go with you / take notes
- arrange for referrals from your doctor to psychologists / trauma or bereavement counselors

### **To protect yourself and your family after a collision:**

- Find an advocate to help you with the criminal justice system (if relevant).
- Have someone with you when meeting lawyers, insurers, benefit program advisers.
- Make sure all filing deadlines are met.
- Find a competent and ethical lawyer:
  - someone experienced in wrongful death claims (if relevant).
  - someone experienced in neuro-law if you have a spinal cord or brain injury.
- Make sure the contract you sign with a lawyer protects you.
- Learn all you can about the medical-legal-insurance systems in your area:
  - see the *Auto Accident Survivor's Guide* for information and advice on medical, psychological and interpersonal issues after a collision and how to get the help you need and the compensation you're entitled to in bodily injury and wrongful death claims.