**Some thoughts from a trauma-informed perspective on supporting ministers in funeral**

**ministry during the Covid-19 Crisis**

As the Covid-19 crisis deepens, we will, as ministers, be called upon to take funerals for those who have died from the virus, as well as from other causes, in circumstances that may well be very distressing for us as well as for the few family members who are able to attend, and those who can’t.

What we are going through globally, locally in our communities and churches, and in our families and within ourselves is a traumatic situation. Trauma can be a shock event like an accident or act of violence, but it can also be a slowly unfolding situation over a period of time as in the current crisis that we are all facing personally and professionally.

First a bit of background to set the context as it’s helpful to understand the **main characteristics of trauma** which many of us are experiencing in some form or another in this situation in order to know how best to approach supporting ourselves and others:

* + **overwhelm** - our normal capacities to cope become overwhelmed and we feel that we can’t handle all that’s coming at us; it’s all “too much, too fast, too soon”[[1]](#footnote-2). The sense of overwhelm can also come from having to receive and handle other people’s distress and pain, and to have to keep doing it, while trying to hold our own anxiety and distress.
  + **broken connections -** quite literally our physical connections with one another have been broken and we can’t console others with a touch or hug as we would normally do. Not only are families distressed by the loss of a family member, but also by not being able to have the funeral they would have liked to celebrate and honour the deceased. Our understanding of who we are and how we connect as ministers is being shaken, and how we understand the world and God is being challenged. When previously safe assumptions about how we live, what we think and what we experience are thrown up in the air it feels a scary place to be, in our bodies and emotions as much as in our minds.
  + **trauma is a whole body experience** - we know we are going through something difficult because our bodies, not our minds, tell us first! All sorts of body experiences and symptoms emerge, such as a tight chest, stomach ache, needing to go to the toilet more often, headaches, tiredness, loss of concentration, depleted energy levels, neck and shoulder tension, skin conditions and so the list goes on depending on where your stress registers in your body. The amygdala, our ‘early warning system’ in our ‘feeling brain’ (limbic system) is telling us we are not safe and is triggering the nervous system to send out the stress hormones adrenalin and cortisol to get us ready for fight or flight. When these hormones are coursing round our bodies, we quite literally lose connection with our ‘thinking brain' (pre-frontal cortex) and we react instead either with fix-it energy, or with collapse. Most importantly, we lose our capacity to be truly present to ourselves or to others.

So, how does this help in terms of being faced with taking several funerals in extremely distressing circumstances, on top of all the overwhelm and disconnection we may already be feeling in our ministries and personal lives?

* + **Naming** what’s happening: this might sound obvious, but attentive listening to exactly what is going on for us enables us **to name precisely** what we are experiencing in our bodies and our feelings. Our nervous systems start to calm when we can name exactly what it is we are feeling.It releases tension when this is heard and received in ourselves and, whether in person or virtually, by a warm resonant other. One of our deepest needs is to know that we are understood, so being able to share what we are going through with someone else who can acknowledge with us that what we are facing is overwhelming, difficult, upsetting, confusing etc, is a huge resource. Once we’ve been able to name what we’re feeling, then we can begin to work with what we need to move forwards.
  + **Normalising:** understandingthat what we are experiencing is perfectly normal in a traumatic and anxiety provoking situation. Knowing that we can’t stop our bodies reacting initially in this way helps us to realise that we are not being weak or inadequate, and to let go of guilt or shame that we are not coping better than we feel we should.
  + **Breathing:** when we are agitated, anxious, or distressed we can’t think clearly as we have temporarily lost connection with our thinking brain. Calming the triggered nervous system is what helps us to re-regulate ourselves and bring our thinking brains back on-line. One of the most effective ways to do this is to pay attention to the breath and to consciously slow it down, lengthening the inhale and the exhale for a few breaths and bringing our awareness to our bodies being grounded in the present, in physical space and time. A way of doing this is:
    - * to stop for a few moments and be aware of your body, your feet on the floor, the chair supporting you, and any areas of tension that you notice in your body;
      * to become aware of your breath and then to take a slightly longer inhale (for the count of 3) and to lengthen the exhale (for a count of 4), and to do this about 5 times;
      * to stay with the quiet for a few moments, to be present to the moment and your experience, and then bring it to a close perhaps with a thanksgiving to God for the gift of his presence with us in our breath.
  + **Resourcing:** when our feeling brain is calmed then it can connect well with the thinking brain to gain access to our resources! This is the space for working out creative and sensitive ways of handling the service and what will be of most help to the family. Positive and practical ways forward emerge along with drawing on other resources that may be available to us.
  + **Being present**: one of the gifts of this approach is that you can then practice breathing, calming and centring when faced with the actual funeral and, from this place, be more able to communicate a sense of safety and space in which the distress and grief of those attending can be held. It’s not only viruses that are contagious, but feelings are too. Being able to be present to and hold difficult feelings, our own and those of others, is calming for others and enables them to be more present in the midst of very distressing circumstances. Sometimes we’re afraid of naming in the service how difficult this is for the family in case we make it worse, but actually the opposite is true. People feel that you understand, that you ‘get it’. It speaks to their souls.
  + **Self care:** doing this kind of funeral ministry on top of all the other pressures and different ways of ministering in this crisis, is hugely demanding and tiring, so it is really important that you don’t feel guilty about attending to your own needs. We are in this for the long haul. Be kind to yourself!

And finally - some very practical advice for at the Crematorium as on Twitter @PeterCo27756774

You’re not wimpy

Keep your distance from folks

Go vested, to avoid using the small vesting room

Use your own prayer book/order of service

Wear disposable gloves until you begin

Use hand gel after touching anything & avoid touching your face

Shower afterwards

Hilary Ison 01.04.20

[www.tragediesandcongregations.org.uk](http://www.tragediesandcongregations.org.uk/)

1. Peter Levine, author of several books on understanding and healing trauma [↑](#footnote-ref-2)