

### ***Treating people whose loved ones have been murdered***

The December, 2010, iss of *PsyFin* featured a “Niche Marketing” article on victims of violent crime. Philadelphia therapist Kathleen O’Hara has made this the focus of her practice.

O’Hara tells us she’d been in practice for several years when her own son Aaron was murdered 12 years ago. “I didn’t do anything for the first couple of years after,” she says. “I barely worked.”

Before Aaron was murdered, she was a general therapist, and had done some grief work with suicide survivors and others. After he was murdered, she and her other son went for counseling at the Anti-Violence Partnership. Eventually, she began speaking in front of victims groups, and eventually rebuilt her practice.

To work in this field, she tells us, therapists need to familiarize themselves with the victims compensation system. “You need to know what is going to happen and how to get it,” says O’Hara.

Each state is different. This is why the training to familiarize yourself with the criminal justice system in your state is critical, says O’Hara.

“You’re going to have to walk the client through this, so if you don’t know it, how can you help them? If you decide this is an area you want to develop and become known for, you have to train for it. The criminal justice system is complicated, too.”

Job 1 is assisting the victim emotionally, explains O’Hara. And to do that, you need some training, and some background reading in the subject. “Familiarize yourself. Otherwise you’re going to do more harm than good. You can’t step into this unprepared.”

Once you feel confident enough to get started, she suggests going online to find your state’s Victims Advocate website. Then call a Victims Advocate and take him/her to lunch, suggests O’Hara. “Call them up and say, ‘I’ve been reading a lot about this and I’m beginning to work with victims. Let me take you to lunch because I want to help here.’ And then find out how it works from them.

“Most of us don’t know anything about this till it happens to us. We think we do. I was a therapist and I thought I understood it. Well you don’t. I can’t

tell you how many victims tell me they can’t find a therapist. They say, ‘when I talk to a therapist, I can see them drawing back.’

“Therapists can do damage when they think they know more than they do...Patients read the therapist’s body language, and end up being retraumatized. Then they never get the help they need.

“Victims say, ‘I don’t want another therapist. I went to one and I knew I’d have to take care of her.’

“Before this ever happened to me, I counseled a woman whose daughter had been murdered. I remember thinking, ‘okay, I’m going to use my tools and work with her.’

But I was absolutely aware of the fact that I did not know what she was experiencing, and I did not want to know, because I had small children at the time.

“After this happened to me I realized that I really had no idea...You’re meeting people in the heart of the trauma. It’s usually in the first year.”

O’Hara explains that while this work is distantly related to other clinical areas such as early childhood trauma, psychodynamics, grief, and PTSD, it has its own special shadings that make it different and unique.

“I was not a specialist in grief prior to my personal experience,” she adds. “I learned hands on.”

You can find plenty of trauma training courses online. It’s also helpful to get PTSD training, O’Hara tells us, and at least read about and familiarize yourself with victims of crime.

Media involvement is another issue that makes this a unique niche. “The thing with victims is we’re never the first to know. The media often knows before we do, and then you see your loved one’s face or the murderer on television. You’re thinking, ‘Oh my God! Did something happen?’

Later, as the case makes its way through the criminal justice system, there can be other sudden traumas for a murder victim’s loved ones, such the announcement of a pleas bargain.

The family of the victim isn't always informed. "They see it on the evening news...So this is a little different from working with regular people.

"It's a very good way to set of referrals, it's an underserved market, and it's a valuable service to offer -- but it behooves the therapist to know what they're dealing with."

So how do you know if you can handle this niche? "What most victims report to me--and I've worked with thousands of them--is that they want to know that they don't have to take care of the therapist.

"No matter what kind of therapy you're doing, you always start with the story. And when that victim comes in and tells you the story, they'll know right away if you can handle from your body language, what you say, and the space you provide.

"These are terrible, awful stories. Therapists have to check themselves to find out how they feel about these things. What's happening for them as they listen? If you're backing off, victims know it. If you go in unprepared, you're going to be traumatized.

O'Hara's own story is as bad as any you're likely to hear. "My son Aaron's house had been broken into, and he and his roommate were abducted. That's what we were told at first...We couldn't find them for five days, and it turned out they were tortured and then shot in the head.

"This is hard stuff, and hard for people to hear. Not everyone can do this. You have to be prepared. It's a skill like anything else."

O'Hara's book, *A Grief Like No Other*, was published in 2006. In it, she presents a seven-stage model that came directly out of her own experience as well as the experiences of patients over the years. It's available online at Amazon, Borders, and Barnes & Noble.

"What makes it a grief like no other is that someone has committed this crime and taken your loved one away from you. You don't have the opportunity to grieve in the normal way. You get a phone call that your son is missing, and then it doesn't stop. There's usually a trial, or perhaps they didn't catch the killer and you have to live with that."

## Training

"There's very little formal training you can get for this, and that's one of the problems," says O'Hara. She has developed curricula based on her book, and offers it to educators, clergy, mental health professionals, and other health care providers. She also does trainings for Victims Compensation Boards and for Victims' Advocates at the Department of Justice.

In March, 2011, she's offering a two-day program at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco. It's for graduate psychotherapy students and will be open to therapists in the community as well.

She's also offering online trainings via WebEx.com.

## Resources

-- The Association for Death Education and Counseling. This is one of the oldest interdisciplinary organizations in the field of dying, death and bereavement. Its nearly 2,000 members include a wide array of mental and medical health personnel, educators, clergy, funeral directors, and volunteers. Contact them in Deerfield, IL, (847)509-0403, [www.adec.org](http://www.adec.org).

-- The National Organization for Victim Assistance. Provides information on victim's rights, assistance, and services. Contact them in Washington, DC, (202)232-6682, or (800)TRY-NOVA, [www.try-nova.org](http://www.try-nova.org).

-- The Compassionate Friends. Provides grief support after the death of a child. Contact them in Oak Brook, IL, (877)969-0010, [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org).

-- Bereaved Parents of the USA. Offers information and support to parents and families who are struggling with the death of a child. Contact them in Park Forest, IL, [www.bereavedparentsusa.org](http://www.bereavedparentsusa.org).

-- Parents of Murdered Children. Provides resources, support, and advocacy information to parents of murdered children. Contact them in Cincinnati, OH, (513)721-5683, or (888)818-POMC, [www.pomc.com](http://www.pomc.com).

-- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org).

-- The Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. This is for the children of military service personnel. Contact: [www.taps.org](http://www.taps.org).

-- International Association of Trauma Professionals, Sarasota, FL, [www.traumaprofessional.net](http://www.traumaprofessional.net).

-- Green Cross Academy of Traumatology, Becker, MN, (888)498-4495, [www.greencross.org](http://www.greencross.org).