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Television and radio are no places for recently bereaved

The media has a heavy responsibility when it comes to the grief associated with suicide, writes **BREDA O'BRIEN**

ON THE *Late Late Show* on September 25th, in an interview with Tony Sutherland, father of Darren, Ryan Tubridy referred to an elephant in the room. In cryptic terms, he spoke of legal teams and information yet to emerge. However, he did not refer to the even larger elephant in the room. What was Tony Sutherland doing on the *Late Late Show* less than two weeks after his son's death?

One week later, the parents of Shane Clancy were sitting in the same studio. Shane Clancy took the life of another young man and then died by his own hand. His mother and step-father were utterly bewildered and naturally wanted to show another side to their beloved son. But what were they doing in the *Late Late* studio, while their grief was still so painfully raw?

My own hands are not entirely clean when it comes to families and grief. As a researcher in RTÉ, I set up interviews with people who had been bereaved, and attended post-broadcast meetings where people on production teams spoke in half-ashamed terms of what great television it made when people cried.

I even once approached a family bereaved in tragic circumstances about appearing on a live TV programme. I still burn with shame every time I think about that appalling lapse of judgment. It has left me with a conviction that television and radio are no places for the recently bereaved, or for anyone who has not come to terms with loss, no matter how long ago it was.

The media has a particularly heavy responsibility when it comes to the unique grief associated with suicide. We know that copycat suicide accounts for up to 10 per cent of suicides. We also know that a further one in 10 suicides occur in those bereaved by suicide, and that the time of highest risk is within the first year. International figures suggest that up to 60 people are affected by every suicide. In Ireland, where social networks are much richer and wider, the numbers affected are probably far higher.

There are very few situations where so many people are at risk in such a concentrated span of time. It provides a rare intervention opportunity. If handled well, lives can be saved. If handled badly, lives can be lost. It is that stark and simple.

It cannot be presumed that people recently bereaved by suicide are in a position to give full informed consent to a media appearance, such is the extraordinary maelstrom of guilt, anger, loss and hurt suicide stirs up.

With these comes a burning need for answers. Live television is not the place to provide those answers. This is not to query the judgment of bereaved people who choose to be interviewed, but simply to point out their vulnerability.

Normal grief has a predictable pattern, although the timelines may vary. Abnormal grief results when that process is interrupted. Often, grief re-emerges in a considerably more burdensome form that is much more difficult to deal with. In short, normal grieving can be derailed by anything that acts as an obstacle to coming to terms with the simple, awful, reality of a death. Media attention has a massive potential to interfere in the process of grieving.

Certainly, people can derive great meaning from an apparently meaningless event by transforming their loss into a drive to prevent others suffering the same pain. But the time for that is after coming to terms with grief, not during, or even worse, before such a process.

Families blinded by suicide grief need especial care. Suicide contagion is real. The people most at risk are not only those who knew the person well, but also those who identify most closely with the person who has died, putting even strangers at risk. Would anyone consent to appear on a programme if it was spelt out clearly to them that doing so at such a highly emotionally charged time was more likely to cause harm than good?

The question that needs to be asked is simple. Who benefits from such an appearance? The harsh reality is that ratings are the most likely beneficiary. There is a compulsive quality to watching that is almost voyeuristic. You know you should not be witnessing something so intimate, so raw, but you cannot look away.

One of the worst moments of the interview with Shane Clancy's parents came when his mother was asked: "What happened that night?" In the most graphic possible terms, his mother described exactly how her son had killed himself.

It breached every known media guideline on suicide. For example, the Irish Association of Suicidology guidelines state specifically that "explicit or technical details of death by suicide should be avoided".

Was his mother at fault? Of course not. She was simply doing what any mother would have done, trying to make sense of something appalling by talking about it. The fault lay both with having her there, and asking the question in the first place.

In no way am I suggesting that suicide should not be talked about or should return to being a taboo subject. The media can play a vital role in highlighting that there is always a better way than suicide, and there is always someone who can help. It can lobby for improvements in our severely under-resourced mental health services, and provide models of best practice.

We all know that suicide leaves people utterly crushed and bewildered in its wake. Nothing, and especially not ratings, justifies the risk of doing further damage.