

support and advocacy
for survivors of violence and trauma



Witness Justice e-Newsletter

December 2008

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End of Year Note from WJ's President & CEO

Advocacy, innovation, and transformation - those are just a few words that come to mind as I reflect on this year of tremendous growth for Witness Justice. As someone who follows our work, your voice plays an integral role in what we focus on and where our energy is planned for the year to come. We always welcome your perspective on where the gaps in systems and programs exist and will continue to work with you to see those gaps addressed so that survivors have the best opportunity for healing and wellness.

From everyone at Witness Justice, happy holidays and all the very best for the new year!

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Helga Luest (West)
President & CEO, Witness Justice

Changing Systems, Changing Lives

Tears of Blood: Self-inflicted Violence (SIV)

Changing Systems

Some call me a cutter. Others, a self-harmer. Or a self-mutilator. Or para-suicidal. People with initials after their names frequently use other terms to describe such behavior. None of these 'labels' fit. It is called self-inflicted violence (SIV). The truth is, I've been wounded, my wound has not healed, and I'm in pain. So I'm crying-tears of blood.

You would never know by my appearance that I harbor a deep wound caused in my childhood. You see, my father used to...I can't really talk about it. But I do talk about it-in another way. If I rolled up my sleeve, you would see the lines that represent the way I express the pain that I cannot yet discuss in words. You would see my tears of blood.

If you could see them. But I've become quite good at hiding them. I never wear short-sleeved shirts. Others like me never wear shorts or skirts or anything that might expose the tell-tale marks of SIV. I'm not alone. How many of us are there? It's hard to say, because this behavior is highly stigmatized. I'm not suicidal, yet that is the conclusion that most people make when they discover that I cut myself. They see the cuts that I made, and they freak. "She must be suicidal," they say. This overreaction discourages others like me from seeking advice or help. And so we cover up our wounds. In more ways than one...

I don't cut myself because I want to end my life; in fact, most of the cuts are small and not serious injuries. I cut myself as a way of living with a secret history. I cut, but others burn or hit themselves for various reasons related to the trauma they experienced and the memory with which they must live. No matter what type of self-inflicted violence, the self-harm often acts as a way for the trauma survivor to express an emotion that she has not yet found the words to describe; it may also be a physical act of anger or grief-an angry brushstroke on the canvas of a tormented soul. My scars are symbols of my struggle to survive and cope with the trauma I've experienced.

SIV is for some a way to trump the sense of helplessness that often plagues trauma survivors. This feeling of helplessness can lead to flashbacks-a horrific return to the scene of the traumatic event-but cutting or scratching can keep the trauma survivor grounded in the present. Others who feel guilt or shame may hurt themselves as a sort of self-imposed sentence of corporal punishment.

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Some harm themselves as a way to avert the despair they feel in the aftermath of trauma. As such, it may act as a substitute for suicide. Therefore, when well-minded service providers attempt to stop self-harming behavior, they remove a valuable coping mechanism and can make a bad situation worse.

While the specific reason for the self-inflicted violence (SIV) differs from person to person, one common factor unites them: they've found a way to cry...tears of blood.

Advocating for Change

A disconnect exists between the factors leading to people who inflict violence upon themselves and the assumptions that service providers make about them. In many cases, this disconnect can lead to negative consequences. For example, because she does not want to be labeled as suicidal or even "parasuicidal," she might not seek help or treatment. In fact, many experts believe that SIV is not a precursor to suicide or a failed attempt at a suicide, but rather a vehicle that diminishes the anguish that could lead to a suicide. As such, the SIV may actually function as suicide prevention. Thus, a service provider's first instinct to stop the SIV may create a dangerous chain-reaction: the disappearance of SIV could lead to the reappearance of the despair that could result in more dangerous behavior. Some who practice SIV describe it as a release valve. Without the release valve...

This disconnect suggests that one of the keys to providing more effective help is education about trauma and its complex relationship to SIV. There is no better place to find out about SIV than [Healing Self-Injury](#) - a website program hosted by the Sidran Institute and overseen by Ruta Mazelis. *Healing Self-Injury* evolved from a publication titled "The Cutting Edge." The site provides information about SIV, information about training, and a blog.

The first thing that one sees when visiting the blog post on *Healing Self-Injury* is a quote about SIV: "You'll stop when it's time." This very well could be the first lesson to service providers.

Editor's note: each month, the column "Changing Systems - Changing Lives," will explore a topic raised by readers, discuss issues relevant to that topic, and provide suggestions for effecting change in trauma-informed care systems. Witness Justice invites suggestions for future topics; please email suggestions to editor@witnessjustice.org.

Customize Rituals for the Holidays to Ease Pain of Loss and Traumatic Grief

By *Connie Saindon, MA, LMFT*
Founder of the [Survivors of Violent Loss Network](#)

It is well known that anniversary dates and holidays, especially the first one, can be difficult for those who's loved one has passed away. When this loss is an unnatural death, holidays can seem unbearable and insurmountable. Thoughts of merriment may arouse feelings of guilt and worries of being disloyal. Life is shattered for those who experience violence or have lost a loved one to a violent death and there are three basic assumptions that are shattered after traumatic events as such. They are: life has meaning, the world is safe, and I have worth.

[\[1\]](#)

Rituals, ceremonies, and symbols are necessary for the management of fears and the adaptation to changes necessary in relationships after violence or death.[\[2\]](#) Rituals serve to acknowledge change without threatening the overall social order and allow one emotional engagement along while creating a safe distance to ease the overwhelming pain of loss. Ceremonies help with adapting to what has happened and work to compartmentalize the review of losses amid holiday reminders. Symbols help replace painful intrusions and memories. An example of this is when Ann worried about what she would do with the neck and tail of the turkey at Thanksgiving. She stated that her brother, who was a homicide victim the summer before, always claimed the turkey parts every year. This holiday, she ate the tail in honor of her brother. She chuckled about her experience saying: " I don't know what he ever saw in them: they're all fat!" Ann moved from being frozen about what to do, into an activity that honored her brother and gave her an unexpected laugh; something she had been unable to do since his death.

The work of family therapists Evan Imber Black and Janine Roberts, [\[3\]](#) emphasize the importance of rituals for many life events. They recommend setting up a separate activity prior to a holiday to acknowledge their loved one. An example would be setting aside a special night and inviting friends or family to bring favorite foods for an informal gathering. This special time could also be a time when photos are gathered to begin a memory album. This album could be worked on annually with more photos and stories collected each year. My family did this to help remember our sister who was a murder victim in 1961. Each family member selected photos and stories for their page and we continue to add to our album each year.

To develop your own rituals, consider some of the following ideas and share them with those struggling to cope. Your rituals will give others ideas when their thinking is blocked due to SUGS- sudden upsurges of grief.[\[4\]](#) Activities can include the telling of stories; around

a fireplace, or bonfire; going to the burial site and praying, chanting, singing, serving the needy, making charitable contributions, doing a difficult feat such as a hike, balloon rides, or a surfboard paddleout. Items to use for rituals could be candles, rosemary (for remembrance), seeds, sand, feathers, balloons, crayons, rocks, ribbon, music, stars, and irises (for hope).

Connie Saindon is author of [The Journey: Ten Steps to Learning to Live with Violent Death](#) and contributing author of [Violent Death: Resilience and Intervention Beyond the Crisis](#). Ms Saindon teaches an online course on PTSD and Violent Death.

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- [1] Janoff-Bulman, R., 1992. Shattered assumptions, toward a new psychology of trauma, The Free Press, Macmillan, Inc. New York.
 - [2] Goffman, E., 1971. Relations in public. New York: Harper and Row.
 - [3] Imber-Black, E., Roberts, J., 1992. Rituals for our times. New York: Harper Collins.
 - [4] Rando, T., 1993. Treatment of complicated mourning. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Congressional Issue Briefing on Veterans and Family Safety

In October 2008 Witness Justice hosted a federal issue briefing on veterans of the current conflicts and family safety. Visit the [Witness Justice Web site](#) to learn more about this important issue and the briefing discussion and outcomes.

Board Member Profile of the Month

Jeni Gamble

Sometimes survivors of violent crime need a line. Or rather, a vine. And that is just what Jeni Gamble does: she tosses vines to survivors through her work as Director of VINE Protective Order Services with Appriss, Inc.-the host of "the nation's largest integrated criminal justice information database." The [Victim Information and Notification Everyday](#) (VINE) system is a national 'grapevine' designed to notify survivors when their offender leaves confinement. Its companion, the VINE Protective Order, is also designed to protect survivors by arming them with information. When a protective order is served, or when a hearing is scheduled, the survivor hears about it through the VINE.



Dr. Gamble, who holds a Ph.D. in social work from the University of Louisville's Kent School of Social Work, knows about the importance of vines to survivors. Before running the VINE system for Appriss, Inc., she spent eight years with The Center for Women and Families. The Southern Indiana and Kentucky-based agency provides service to survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault. Her rich experience in the DV field has also led to a number of publications.

Even when she's not tossing VINES to domestic violence survivors, Dr. Gamble is busy raising awareness and funds for DV survivors as a member of Team Heal Trauma-Witness Justice's charity team of Marathon runners.

Sometimes survivors of violent crime need a vine. Dr. Gamble is there to provide one.

Bling Brings Good Tidings; Help WJ by Shopping This Holiday!

This year it's easy to put Witness Justice on your "nice list" with the help of [iGive](#), a free online shopping portal that will donate a percentage of your total purchase amount when you shop at over 700 participating retailers. Just [sign up](#) and each time you enter a participating online store, iGive will automatically display the percentage that will be donated to WJ if a purchase is made. And to make the holidays even more cheerful for Witness Justice, new members who make a purchase within 45 days of enrollment can earn an extra \$5 to benefit our cause!

On our website you can discover other great gift ideas, like [magazine subscriptions](#) for a friend or [Monarch Pearls](#) for that special someone. Monarch Pearls' unique "Survivor charm pearl bracelet" combines that bling with a worthy cause. Just [click here](#) for more details!

Spread the news ...and the holiday cheer! Let your friends know how easy it is to raise money for victims of violence and trauma this shopping season.

Where We've Been...

December 17 - Invited by the director of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Center for Mental Health Services to be a part of the CMHS/SAMHSA discussion meeting of national leaders to contribute important ideas and information for the Obama Administration.

December 9 - Invited to attend the NASMHPD (National Association of State Mental Health Program Directors) States Dialogue Conference to discuss the progression of trauma-informed care.

November 14 - Board Co-Chair, Jeni Gamble, was awarded the [Guy Stevenson Award](#) for Excellence in Graduate Studies. Dr. Gamble earned her Ph.D. in social work from the University Louisville's Kent School of Social Work.

Upcoming Publication - Witness Justice will be referenced in the *Domestic Violence Sourcebook, Third Edition* - a volume in Omnigraphic's *Health Reference Series*. The sourcebook will be published in April 2009.

Witness Justice is a national nonprofit organization created by survivors for survivors. Our mission is to advocate for and support victims of violence and trauma. For more information, visit www.WitnessJustice.org.

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