




# FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Social Work Department  
Royal Children's Hospital

## NEWSLETTER DECEMBER 2009

Welcome to the Royal Children's Hospital's Family Bereavement Support Services' December Newsletter. This month's newsletter includes a summary of group notes taken during the December Group evening, without participant names, as well as quotes from handouts used from the evening's topic, "Remembering Yourself While Remembering Your Child Through the Festive Season".

### *Remembering Yourself While Remembering Your Child Through the Festive Season*



Our December evening bereavement support group was lead by Janet Cowling, a counselor with Very Special Kids and co-facilitated by Carol Quayle. Janet spoke on the importance of remembering yourself while remembering your child at this time of the year. The key aims of the evening's discussion was to acknowledge that this is a particularly difficult time of the year for bereaved families and to get parents thinking about different ways they can look after themselves while still remembering their children.

Janet began the evening by inviting parents to make a creative piece using a star, bell, ball, or butterfly shape and decorating it in memory of their child using a large variety of ribbons, sequins, stickers, bindis, and gemstones with glue sticks and glitter. Glitter and gemstones quickly spread across the tables as everyone engaged in the activity choosing special shapes, materials, colours and symbols to represent their child.


As the group worked on their creations parents got to know each other and shared different stories about their child and the relevance of what they had chosen.

At the conclusion of the activity, Janet asked the group to share different

strategies for stressful times—especially around the festive season. Parents stated, *"I had a bit of panic last month not knowing what I was going to do, but I got some materials and made matching stockings for the girls and got some things to put in both. Afterwards, I will put my daughter's in a special spot."* Others said, *"The family has decided to buy for the children, but they are going to donate the money they would have spent on gifts for my daughter, which I thought was good."*

Janet acknowledged that a common fear that most parents have is that their child will be overlooked. Parents agreed stating *"We've made it explicit what we want and that's what we'll do. Everybody knows it, which is good."* Another parent said *"Every year there is a family photo taken of the grandchildren. This year it was a dilemma because my daughter won't be there..... But she loved string and so everyone will hold a piece of string to represent her in the photo."*

Another said *"We light a candle."* and another *"We've sent an email to the family explaining that we haven't forgotten her and to let them know that we might not be feeling chirpy, but that that's ok. I've warned them that we might not feel sociable on the day and they're going to have to be ok with that."*



*The email was good and they now understand what to expect."*

#### Ways of Remembering

As a result of some on the conversation, one parent asked the group, *"Does anyone feel worse as time goes on?"* Many parents replied that they did. One summarized the group's feelings by saying *"Sometimes they just feel further away."* Janet normalized this as a common fear and asked the group to share some coping strategies.

The group shared the following strategies:

- *"I protect myself by staying away sometimes. I just keep to myself."*
- *"We make Christmas about the kids. This way I almost make myself invisible."*
- *We work for a charity on the day and help the homeless that day—that keeps a lot of family away and helps other kids. We hosted a table full of kids on that day and they got a lot out of it."*
- *"I've done my shopping already."*
- *"I have to try for the other kids, so don't ignore it. We put the tree up and display the cards. I don't feel like it, but I do it."*
- *"I don't want people to send cards that say 'Merry' or 'Happy Christmas'"*



- *“We include his name in every card. Sometimes they don’t like it, but that’s their issue not ours.”*
- *“I include an extra kiss “x” on the cards.*

*This is for my child. No one else may know, but I do.”*

- *“I put a frangipani for her on all the cards. That was special just for her and everyone knows it.”*
- *“We don’t celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the Festival of Light in our religion, but we didn’t really go much this year. We stayed home, but friends came around and rang.”*
- *“We have two other children, that’s what pulls us through.”*
- *“We don’t have any other children. We just have each other and don’t have any other kisses and cuddles. There’s nothing in this world that can give me that joy. I just hope that one day I’ll feel it again……”*

### **Do What You Are Able To**

Carol Quayle encouraged the group to be aware of not trying to do or expect too much of themselves. She spoke of how it can be helpful to “go back to basics” during the festive season. *“You need to be mindful of what you can do and what you can’t and let people around you know. You may not be up to much, or you may feel like getting out and being around others, but not saying or needing to say too much. It’s all ok. There’s no right or wrong way to do it. You just need to look after yourself.”*

A parent summarised the group discussion that followed by saying, *“It’s all we can cope with just doing the small things. We know she’s ok now and it’s what we hang onto.”*

### **Planning Self Care**

Janet reminded the group that *“bereaved parents often struggle to make room in their lives for self care.”* She spoke of the importance of recognizing the demands on you alongside managing the rest of your lives. She invited the group to brainstorm different ideas that help them cope asking each to remember that different strategies may work at different times.

She handed out a Self Care Planner reminding the group that *“we are constantly giving out energy and it is good to think about ways to nurture and nourish yourself that don’t involve money and that can be sustainable.”*

The group was encouraged to brainstorm some ideas and then to decide some that they could write down as part of a plan to look after themselves over the coming weeks.

### **Sustainable Self Care**

- *Walking*
- *Exercise classes*
- *Meditation /breathing / relaxation*
- *Yoga*
- *Get enough sleep / rest*
- *Eating well—lots of fruits and vegetables*
- *Getting a check up with your GP or naturopath*
- *Using vitamins or supplements*
- *Getting back to nature with a walk on the beach or in the garden or bush*
- *Weeding the garden*
- *Planting veggies or plants*
- *Listen to cheerful music*
- *Talk & have conversation with my child*
- *Write / journal—write about how I’m feeling, my life*
- *Write letters to my child*
- *Write poetry*
- *Listen to cultural music— “any song that speaks of love speaks of my child and helps me to relate to him”*
- *Have a charity fund in his name so they can study what he went through and help others*
- *Watching t.v.—stops you thinking and you can slow down*
- *Her photo is on my screen saver on my computer*
- *I say good morning & good night to my child*
- *Attending groups like this*
- *Be with others who can relate to what I am going through*
- *Realising that I don’t have to soldier on alone. Coming here really helps. I don’t have to do it on my own. 2*
- *Learn to say ‘no’*

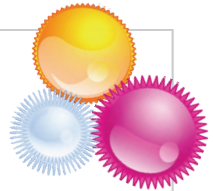
Readers of the newsletter can find a copy of the Self Care Planner opposite and are encouraged to complete it and use it over the holiday period and also at other special times of the year.

### **Some Healthy Reminders**

Janet handed out a tip sheet about self care and preparing for the days ahead. It included the following ideas:

- *Recognise that as a grieving person, you have physical and emotional limitations. Be gentle with yourself. Eat well, exercise regularly and get plenty of rest. Think about what additional self care/pampering activities might be helpful for you to help you get through these days. Keep things simple and avoid excesses.*
- *You and your family come first. Establish what the priorities for you all are by discussing with your family what is truly meaningful for each of you over this time and what is unimportant. Rituals can be comforting and help give some structure to the day. It can be useful to think about what rituals will be helpful for you and your family.*
- *Decide what you feel capable of doing.*
- *Trust your gut instincts and feel able to change plans if you need to*
- *If it would be helpful, let any close relatives and friends know what your needs are for the special days and let them know anything that would be helpful during this time.*
- *Carry tissues with you. Be prepared to cry, laugh or to feel whatever you need to on any day as you may feel a range of emotions including emptiness, loneliness, sadness, despair, anger and guilt particularly around special days. Sometimes people might feel some happiness during some part of these days and feel guilty about these feelings. It is OK to experience some joy while you are grieving and this does not mean you are forgetting your child. Keep in mind that these days will come and pass*





**Changes You Might Make During Festive Days**

*Consider family traditions during festive days and work out what you would like to keep and what would be too difficult. Consider modifying a tradition your family follows slightly, for example going out instead of staying home or vice versa.*

*Work out ways to do things as easily as possible to reduce pressure on yourself and your family.*

*Do something for someone else during the festive season as sometimes it helps to feel like you are doing something for*

*someone else.*

**Things That Might Not Work**

*Pretending you do not hurt or trying not to cry can take an enormous amount of energy. Realistically these days are hard and it is more helpful to acknowledge the hurt and to yearn for your child.*

*Being very busy can get in the way of having time to spend remembering your child. Emotions can then build up. It is often more helpful to keep things simple. Changing everything might be important for some people, but might not work for others as for some people,*

*some traditions are comforting.*

**Conclusion**

To finish the group each parent shared their creation with the group and also spoke of ways which they planned to look after themselves.

**Our Thanks**

On behalf of the parents attending the Family Bereavement Support Group, I'd like to thank Janet Cowling and Carol Quayle for a great evening's discussion.

**Support Services**

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement – Bereavement Counselling Tel. (03) 9265 2111
- Kids Help Line Tel. 1800 551 800 - 24 hrs a day seven days/ week.
- The Compassionate Friends Victoria Tel. (03) 9888 4944 or 1800 641 091 – 24 hrs a day, seven days/wk.
- SIDS and Kids Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 9611 or 1800 240 400 – 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

**Self care**

Think about all the possible activities that you can do to boost yourself to help you cope with the demands on your energy. It is good to think of cost free or cost minimum activities that you can do on a regular basis and then some extra things to do in times of extreme stress. It can be useful to check in with your self care plan on a regular basis to see how you are going and whether you need some more care. When you are feeling exhausted it might be helpful to think about which particular areas of your self care might need some extra attention and to give yourself a boost.

	Activities that are good for your body	Activities to help you emotionally	Activities to support your social needs	Activities that are good for your mind	Activities that nurture your soul
Things that you could do on a daily basis					
Things that can be done if you are needing a bigger boost in this area.					



A regular routine and regular rest, a healthy diet, good hydration and minimal use of caffeine, alcohol or other drugs are all important to help take care of your body. If you are having more difficulty sleeping than usual, are gaining or losing more than a few kilograms of weight or are finding yourself relying on caffeine, alcohol or other drugs you might like to consider talking to your GP or a counsellor about it.



# Parents' Bereavement Support Group Meetings 2010

**Venue:** Seminar Room 2  
4th Floor, Front Entry Building  
Royal Children's Hospital  
Flemington Road  
Parkville 3052

**Time:** 7:30 - 9:00pm

## Dates for the Recently Bereaved Parents' Information & Support Evening

Thursday 4th February

Thursday 6th May

Thursday 5th August

Thursday 4th November

## Dates for the Monthly Parents' Bereavement Support Group

Every 3rd Thursday of the month

February 18th

March 18th

April 15th

May 20th

June 17th

July 15th

August 19th

September 16th

October 21st

November 18th

**2nd Thursday of December**

December 9th

## Dates for the Day Time Parents' Bereavement Support Group

**Venue:** MCPC  
Room 4, 7th Floor,  
South East Building, RCH

**Time:** 10:00am - 12:00pm

Thursday March 4th

Thursday June 3rd

Thursday September 2nd

Thursday December 2nd



*Our letter box is waiting!*

We are in the process of making the newsletter available through email. Please let us know if you would like to continue to receive the newsletter in 2010 through the mail in hard copy or send us your email and we will put you on our email distribution list.

Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends are most welcome in the Newsletters. Share your thoughts, experiences and questions with others who are bereaved.

**Please forward them to:**

The Editor  
Family Bereavement Support  
Programme  
Social Work Department  
Royal Children's Hospital  
Flemington Road  
PARKVILLE VIC 3052  
Phone: 03 9345 6111

Or email: karen.ditty@rch.org.au

The next meeting of the Recently Bereaved Parents Support Group will be held on:

**Thursday 4th February  
7.30 pm - 9 pm**

Family Bereavement Support Evening Group will be held on:

**Thursday 18th February  
7:30 pm - 9:00 pm  
Seminar Room 2, 4th Floor  
Front Entry Building  
Royal Children's Hospital**

In the **February Group** we will have Carol Quayle from Mercy Grief Services speaking about "Making Meaning in Our Grief".

**Please Join us in 2010**

*The newsletter is always a team effort. Thank you to Carol Quayle for co-facilitating the Group and to our skilled and committed Admin Team- Carly Blanche and Rebecca Welsh.*

**Karen Ditty  
Editor**