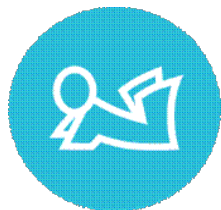


FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME



Social Work Department
Royal Children's Hospital

NEWSLETTER MARCH 2009

Welcome to the March 2009 edition of the Royal Children's Hospital's Family Bereavement Support Group Newsletter. The purpose of this Newsletter is to provide those of you who are unable to attend the Family Bereavement Support Group with a written summary of what has been discussed in the Group. It is hoped that by reading the Newsletter you will be provided with a link with other bereaved parents and family members and that you feel that you are not alone in your grief following the death of your child.

Close Connections: the impact of a child's death on relationships

The theme for the March Family Bereavement Support Group focussed on the impact of a child's death on relationships. These relationships include those between mother and father, siblings and parents, grandparents, extended family members, friends, work colleagues and other people within the bereaved family's social network.

Petra den Hartog (SIDS and Kids counsellor) and Penny McCredie (a volunteer with SIDS and Kids) facilitated the discussion which addressed the unique nature of an individual's 'way of grieving'; the perceived differences between the way men and women grieve; the changes in relationships over time; what is and is not helpful; and, how the participants have gained hope and strength from their relationships with other bereaved parents, some of whom are further 'down the track'.

Individual ways of grieving

Before addressing the impact on relationships, it was noted that the journey after the death of a child is, in many respects, an individual journey. We all grieve differently and there is no set timetable for grief.

In many respects bereavement is a lonely journey, and parents and other family members sometimes have a need to retreat to a 'place' of

their own to shed tears, reflect, and think about the child who has died.

The sadness, desolation and yearning that is experienced following the death of a much loved child was expressed by all participants, and all acknowledged similar thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Anger was spoken about as being a significant aspect of bereaved family members' experience following the death of their child. The "*unfairness of a child dying*" had resulted in the parents losing their old "*calm, patient selves*". They were no longer able to tolerate some behaviour which previously they would have accepted. This has led to a feeling of being isolated and not understood. Unfortunately, anger can also impact negatively on relationships, and it was suggested that speaking with someone outside the support network (eg a counsellor) may help to find ways to avoid misunderstandings within important and long-standing relationships.



The suddenness of the child's death, and the fact that parents had "*not had time to say goodbye*" left a couple of parents "*feeling cheated*". Another parent in the Group, who was given time with her son prior to his death, also felt cheated because

he was so young when he died.

Relationship between partners

It was acknowledged that men and women typically express their grief differently. However, it was noted that it is a mistake to say that all women express their grief in one way and all men in another. We all *'do it differently'*.

'Our culture seems to discourage men from openly expressing their emotions'. It needs to be acknowledged though that just because a man is more silent than his partner does not mean that he is not grieving.

Counsellors at SIDS and Kids have heard many men speak about *"getting in their car or boat and spending time alone when they can cry - without feeling that they need to control their crying"*. Nor does it mean that the man is 'shutting others out'.

It is widely understood and accepted that women are more *"allowed to cry"*. Compared with men, women are often more comfortable expressing their feelings, crying, talking, sharing thoughts and accepting help and support.

Many, but not all, men say little about how they feel. They sometimes *"need to retreat to the shed"* or to another place where they can be left alone to grieve. In these circumstances, being alone can bring solace, comfort and relief.

Further, men often see themselves as *"having to be strong"*; *"to be the providers, protectors, and problem solvers"*. This adds additional stress, particularly in the early days and weeks following bereavement. Supportive relationships can help to ameliorate some of this stress.

One mother who has recently returned to work after a number of years of being at home caring for the children, said that she *"admired (her) partner for returning to work shortly after the death of (their) child ... I have gained a huge respect for my husband since I returned to work"*. She added: *"I respect the way he parents his children. He is without a doubt an overprotective father. He admits that. He won't let them do things which other parents allow because he is afraid they may get hurt. But I know he is like that because he loves his children so much"*.

Although the death of a child places a strain on relationships, most marriages do survive the death of a child – in fact, many bereaved parents say that they are *'more connected'* to their partners after the death of their child.

While acknowledging the *'fragile nature'* of many relationships soon after the death of a child, counsellors often suggest that parents spend some *'quality time'* together every day *'nurturing'* their relationship. This *'quality time'* may include *'doing the dishes while talking, going for a walk, catching up with the day's events, listening to music ...'*

Sometimes bereaved parents feel that their partner does not understand his or her way of grieving. Furthermore, there are differing time tables to grief. Sometimes differences in grieving patterns can lead to misunderstandings. Good communication can help to lessen the frequency and extent of these misunderstandings.

The different "time frames" relating to grief within a relationship was described by one mother: *"When my partner crashed, I stayed strong. When I crashed, he was there for me to lean on. We took it in turns"*.

While acknowledging the wide-ranging difficulties associated with discussing thoughts and feelings, the extent to which partners could communicate openly and honestly was thought to be very important in terms of the ongoing well-being of the relationship. As one mother said: *"Once we said those words honestly and openly, we found we could support each other more"*.

One couple acknowledged that since the death of their child *"(their) relationship has grown and is now better than it ever has been. We have learned to communicate better. We accept that we are both different. I can say to him 'I'm having a grumpy day today', and he accepts that. We talk about it up front."*

The need to *"be patient with each other"* was also emphasised.

Support of Family and Friends

Among the participants of the Group the extent and quality of family and friends' support was wide ranging. One mother described *"the amazing family support"* she and her partner have experienced since the death of their son. *"It has been awesome!"*

Another mother wept as she said that she feels that *"everyone has forgotten our son."* She explained that there was a *"complete lack of family support because (they) live in another country. I've got nowhere to go"*. She described the loneliness associated with the feeling that people have moved on, and that her extended family live overseas. Another parent in the Group empathised with this mother by acknowledging her distress. *"It must be so*

hard not to have anyone". This empathy with, and understanding of each other was very evident within the Group.

One mother explained that **"(she) has learned because of the tragedy (we) have endured. You can make new friendships that are more real and caring than 'friendships you had in the past'**". These qualities of 'extended understanding', 'resilience', 'compassion' and 'hope' which become part of many bereaved parents' ongoing lives were mentioned a number of times during the Group.

Helpful versus not helpful comments and behaviour
Helpful and unhelpful responses of other people following the death of their child had been experienced by all of the participants.

All agreed with the thought that **"it's hard to maintain relationships (with other people) because of the energy sapped by grief"**.

As one parent said: **"Some friends avoid you, and that hurts"**.

In trying to overcome hurtful comments and attitudes one parent explained that she has learned that she needs to **"change (my) expectations of other people. My expectations are too high. I have to adjust my expectations. Then there is less likelihood of my being hurt by what other people say or do. I just do what I need to do."**

It was acknowledged that many people do not know what to say or do following the death of a child. One parent said that (she) **"knew that a girlfriend was struggling (with the child's death), so (I) initiated the contact. And that was OK."**

Counsellors sometimes encourage parents to **'reach out to friends and relatives who will listen'**. Sometimes supportive people around parents don't know what to say and may be **'waiting for a sign that it is ok to talk (about the child)'**.

The **"need to forgive"** was also raised, although participants felt that **"(they) struggled with this concept every day."**

Sibling's grief

The grief experienced by siblings is sometimes overlooked and misunderstood. They too may be angry, withdrawn, devastated and have the additional burden of having to be **"the parent's rock"**. Many bereaved siblings don't talk much about the brother or sister who has died, because they **"don't want to see (their) parents' upset"**.

One mother spoke about **"being concerned that (her teenage son) was not expressing his grief since the death of his little brother. But then I saw some of the stories he had been writing for school. He expresses his grief through his stories. He writes amazing stories"**.

Parents spoke about how they worry about their other children, regardless of whether they are young children, adolescents or older.

It is known that children's reactions to the death of their brother or sister varies according to age. Children's concepts of death mature as they grow. Some behaviour may change for a while, and some young children may regress or become 'clingy'. Young children need to feel safe and secure. Adolescents need to be given the opportunity to talk, or be allowed to be silent when they want to be.

One parent said that she and her husband **"just want (their) children to be happy"**.

A mother explained how she and her teenage son **"share their memories together"** and that she **"finds comfort in his hugs"**. She added that **"when I need to scream, I make sure he doesn't hear me – I don't want to worry him."**

It is important for extended family and friends to acknowledge that brothers and sisters grieve, and that they need support too.

Changes in value system and attitudes

A number of the Group's participants spoke about the profound changes affecting the way they perceive the world since their child's death, the attitudinal changes in what they view as being important or not important, and the strength they have gained since their child's death. **"What used to seem important, now seems trivial"**. **"Your values change – I withdrew from social events because the conversations usually seemed trivial. I have a different value system now."**

Relationship and 'bond' with other bereaved parents

A number of the Group's participants spoke about **"the bond"** they now have with other bereaved parents. They spoke about the fact that **"(they) are now members of 'The Club' – the 'Club' no-one would ever want to join."**

One mother described the **"amazing bond"** she has developed with other parents she has met through SIDS and Kids and **"the intimate nature of the conversations (she has with them)"**. She explained that there is a **"special quality in these conversations and relationships"**.

A father spoke about the friendship he and his wife have developed with another couple who attend the Royal Children's Hospital's Family Bereavement Group. He spoke about the "*similarities in (their) stories*", the "*close geographical proximity of where (they) live*", their "*shared experiences*" and the "*comfort of knowing that someone else feels and thinks the same way*".

A mother said that she had "*developed new friendships among bereaved parents which are real, honest and nurturing*".

Another parent described other bereaved parents as being her "*soul mates*".

When discussing the value of support groups, a mother said that "*early on, soon after (her son) died, I attended a support group and listened to the other mothers whose children died a couple of years before (her son). Those parents gave me hope. Now, three years down the track, I am like them. I suppose I now provide hope to other more recently bereaved parents*". And, "*support groups allow me to be just me.*"

Maintaining a close connection with their child

One mother explained that "*forgetting (him) is my greatest fear.*" Others in the Group reassured her that that would not happen. And one mother spoke of the "*gifts our children have given us.*"

Group participants spoke about the "*mysterious occurrences*", "*freakish signs*", and "*amazing coincidences*" that have occurred since their child died. They found all of them "*comforting*" and "*precious gifts*" which have "*extraordinary meaning*" for the parents.

The maintenance of a '*close connection*' or '*continuing bond*' with their child was felt to be the most important ingredient in the participants' ongoing lives.

Changes over time

One parent described how "*the second six months (after her child's death) was worse than the first six months. But now, over twelve months since (his) death, I sometimes have a good day.*"

One mother, whose little boy died three years ago said: "*I'm in a much better and lovely space now*".

Summing up:

Petra concluded this session entitled 'Close Connections: The impact of a child's death on relationships' by saying:

'You will be forever changed (by the death of your child), life will be different, you might change your values, priorities, job, career, religion, attitudes. Your relationships will reflect these changes. Seek out positive people who can listen (to you), and above all - be gentle, kind and patient with each other'.

SIDS and Kids Victoria provides ongoing counselling and support to parents and families whose baby or young child has died suddenly and unexpectedly from any cause. The child may have been stillborn, died in the neonatal period, from SIDS, accidental death, homicide, fast onset illness or a pre-existing condition.

**Phone: 1800 240 400 (24 hours)
www.sidsandkids.org.au**

**-Vivienne Bateman-
Bereavement Services Co-ordinator**



Straight from the Heart

We would like to thank Kylie, mother of Bianca who died at the age of 8 on 17 January 2009, for this poem, which was in a sympathy card.

*Kylie says that the poem seems to put a smile on her face, and she hopes it is helpful to others.
Thank you Kylie.*

A LITTLE ANGEL'S BLESSING...

A little Angel sat in heaven's hands
To try to help you understand

Why she left this earth so small
And chose in heaven to grow tall

Her words are simple, her words are true
They carry a message just for you

Your love resides within her heart
To her you are never apart

The times you laughed, the times you played
These are memories, together you made

Her life was filled with happiness too
These were gifts that came from you

The time had come to grow her wings
Heaven has blessings, her little voice sings

The wind will now be her embrace
Protecting you warmly, touching your face

The sun will shine for her each day
Reminding you fondly to laugh and play

The gift of love, she will deliver to you
Through hugs from friends and family too

Her reason for leaving the earth so small
And choosing in heaven to grow tall

Was so she could sit on a star each night
Watching over you, as your special light.



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:

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PARKVILLE VIC 3052



Our letter box is waiting!

Phone: 03 9345 6111

Or email: vivienne.bateman@rch.org.au

The next meeting of the
Parents' Bereavement Support Evening Group
will be held on:

Thursday 16th April

7:30 pm – 9:30 pm

Seminar Room 2, 4th Floor

Front Entry Building

Royal Children's Hospital

The April Group will be joined by Garrett O'Dowd, Mercy Western Grief Services.

He will explore the sense of chaos and loss of control through the topic

“From Doona Day To Coping With Grief; exploring the experience and developing ways to manage lives changed forever”.

Please join us in April

The newsletter is always a team effort. Thank you to Ms. Petra den Hartog (counsellor) and Penny McCredie (bereaved parent) from SIDS and Kids Victoria for facilitating the March meeting of the Parents' Bereavement Support Group. A particular thank you to our skilled, committed Administration Team- Carly Blanche, Rebecca Welsh and Sam Harris for their work with the newsletter and with the FBSP.

