

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER August 2019



Welcome to the August 2019 newsletter of the Family Bereavement Support Programme. We hope that in reading the newsletters and being a part of the groups you will find connection with other parents, support and encouragement to help sustain you as you grieve for your child.

“Looking after yourself each day: who and what can you draw on to help you?”

This August fifteen bereaved parents met to talk together about how they find ways of looking after themselves and getting by each day as they navigate their grief. Attendees at the group ranged from over ten years bereaved, to very newly bereaved parents, thus participants were able to speak from various points in their grief trajectory, and share how time and different contexts may affect how you see things and what you need.

The group began with introductions. Attendance at the group included five parents who were attending for the first time, others who were many months or a year bereaved, and several

participants for whom grief has become a familiar journey over many years since their child died. People shared a little of their stories and then began discussing the evening's topic, introduced by the facilitator as how parents look after themselves from day to day, what and who do they draw on – this being about both looking after self and also looking after your memories of your child. Group members gently supported each other in listening and offering reflection about others' responses and their own.

People look after their memories and their connection with their departed child in diverse ways.

One mother talked about going to the cemetery as something that was sustaining to her and her husband immediately after their child's death and is still sustaining three years on. She described how from the beginning it was unspoken between her and her husband, the need to go there together each day. She states it is still what helps her:

focus, something else to focus on”.

Often parents speak about the ways in which they connect with the memory of their child and keep them part of family life. In this group one mother talked about how her house is “filled” with her son. “He is everywhere I want him to be – and my (other) son is learning that and growing up learning that his



“It’s really peaceful; we say good-night to him every night. Going to the cemetery each day helps me”.

Another mother talked about how for her after her son's death, work was what got her through each day. She stated that the support given her by her workplace was “unconditional”, that her manager's compassion helped her. Work was also something she drew on to give her “seven hours of the day to

brother is everywhere he wants him to be”. This way of approaching things makes her son present in the lives of the family, a way to help him “live on”. It also gives her what she calls an “inner strength”.

Having other children to live for was identified by some parents, whose circumstances allowed this, as an important factor in getting through each day. “My boys keep

me going”, expressed one. It was noted by one parent that children’s way of thinking and processing grief can, in its simplicity, make you re-think how you’re processing your own grief. A birth in the family was described by another parent as bringing “light”. For many, other family members are what “keeps us going”. “They give you strength - they make me strong”, said one mother. Being there for other children can be a strong driver for getting through each day: “You have to find something within yourself to keep going”. Watching videos of family when they were together with the child who died was particularly important to one parent, for whom “being there for the others”, whilst still reconnecting around memories of her child who died, was crucial. However many still mourned the loss of “normal parent life”.

The concept of “post-traumatic growth” has been spoken about in trauma literature. A similar kind of concept was spoken about by several parents in this group session. Many talked about the fact that there is, despite the trauma of their loss, an experience of growth

from their experiences. Identity, belonging and community (whether broader networks or the community created in one’s own or extended family) – were identified as key resources people draw upon to get through the difficult times. For some, continuing to invest in life becomes a way of paying homage to one’s child. As one mother expressed: “We promised [our child] we would live our lives, and that’s what we do. Early on it was a conscious thought, now it’s not conscious; we just do it”.

The question of identity emerged as an important but at times vexed theme. One mother talked about her entire sense of identity and belonging being connected to “being a mum”. She stated “All I know how to do is be a mum. I have two sides, what society wants me to do, and the other – being a mum, where it feels right and where I belong”. Yet another talked about her changing identifications: “I was a mum, then I wasn’t; I went back to being a wife”. Unlike the mother who found one of her major solaces in the structure of work, for this mother going to work was hard as it was as if she had to put a mask on every day. What this mother felt was sustaining to her was her

therapist who “really nourished my relationship with my son”. She stated that she had to “redefine” her identity as both “a grieving parent and a parent of a living child”.

Several parents spoke about the significance of the hospital – both the place and the care given there – as a significant part of their identity. “I craved the familiar” said one mother. “It was a part of my identity; being at RCH was my self-preservation”. Another stated that the help from hospital staff was enormously important – “professional help but so compassionate”.

People spoke about a number of strategies they used to look after themselves. Most felt that they needed to have designated “personal time”. Some parents used this time to write, for example via journaling: “Having a safe space to speak truthfully and honestly”. For some social media fulfilled this

role. One mother started writing a Facebook page in order to write about her son as “no-one really got to meet him” (due to his extended hospitalisation). Another participant talked of the comfort she finds in walking. Some also spoke about how they let out frustrations and anger – for example by going to the gym.

Many group participants spoke about the important place the group holds for them in helping them get through. “Once a month it’s time for him. This connection, in the group, is a connection to your child”. Others felt similarly. The group for many is a time set aside every month for connecting, remembering and talking of their child, as one mother put it “a space every month to sit with what happened, to talk about my son”.

Though revisiting the hospital can hold traumatic memories for some



parents, others draw comfort from it. One mother stated that “coming back here can feel so comforting - being back here helps me deal with things”. There was general agreement that having something of a shared experience and shared understanding is invaluable, whether via the group or by connecting with friends who are going through something similar. “Friendship gives me strength”. Connection and compassion were strong themes emerging in the discussion of what people draw on for strength. Building connections with those who share something of your experience was seen as very nurturing, though also oddly like “being part of an exclusive club which no-one else gets”. Several spoke of getting frustrated with those who do not understand, but also the problematics of this feeling and of the expectation that others could possibly understand, which brings an inevitable frustration. How could anyone fathom what a bereaved parent is going through? Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, some people *are* able to offer compassion even when they have not had a similar experience,

whilst others cannot.

One of the more recently bereaved parents asked those whose child had died many years ago: “Do the questions ever change - the question ‘Why’”? Despite the sense that, (as a grandmother attending the group pointed out), “if you had answers, maybe things would be easier”, one long-bereaved mother reflected that “you are never going to get the answer to that question (why)”. Another who has been attending for a long while, commented that you still have questions, but the questions change over time, and with this your sense of the world changes too: “the familiar....everything’s the same, but everything is different”. Many bereaved parents, at least for a time, have a sense of needing to hold on to the pain: “I don’t want the pain to go away; I want people to remember him”. Given this, allowing yourself to draw on things and people to invest in your life each day can be a long and difficult process. However this group of bereaved parents, with their similar yet uniquely individual experiences, were able

to demonstrate in their presence, their listening and words, and their care of each other, how they manage to do it.



The Parent Bereavement Newsletter is going digital

From October 2019 we will be sending newsletters via email each month. Many readers have already been receiving the newsletter this way, but for others we realise this may be a big change. Please let us know your email address if we do not already have it, and if the change raises difficulties for you please contact Marina Puljic via email: Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au or Helen Stewart/Robyn Clark by phone on 9345 6111.



*May the winds of heaven
Blow Softly...*

*And whisper in your ear
How much we love and miss you*

And wish

That you were here

*Swanborough
funerals*

Our letter box is Waiting!



Contributions such as responses and reflections on the groups' themes, poems, letters, songs, reviews of books that you may have found helpful, quotations from parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters and friends, feedback about this newsletter are most welcome. Share your thoughts, experiences, questions with others who are bereaved. Please forward them to:

Family Bereavement Support Programme
Social Work Department
Royal Children's Hospital
50 Flemington Road
PARKVILLE VIC 3052
Phone: 03 9345 6111
Or email*:
Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au

****If you would like to receive
the newsletter by email
please send us your email
details to the provided
email address.****

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

**Thursday 19th September 2019
7:30 pm – 9:00 pm
The RCH Foundation Board Room
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road
Parkville, VIC 3052**

Please join us to discuss the topic:

The Impact of Grief on Communication.

The experience of grief and loss changes so many aspects of bereaved parents' lives.

September's group will explore how the grief journey impacts on the way you communicate with others.

Please Join us in September

*The newsletter is always a team effort.
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