

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2019



Welcome to the November 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.

“Rituals that support grief”

In the November group we explored rituals as a way parents can maintain their continuing bonds with their children, honouring them and also being inspired by them. Pastoral Care services were to attend but unfortunately were unable to attend on the night but provided some pertinent articles and references to prompt our thinking and discussion. The articles all had similar themes, namely that rituals can be

collective or individual, organised or spontaneous, large in scale or small- the main thing about a ritual is that it needs to feel right for you.

One parent, who was approaching the first anniversary of her son's death, talked about making plans to spend the day at the zoo **'because that's the last thing we were able to do together and we cherish that lasting memory'**. Also she talked about wanting her **'older son**



to know mum goes here for happy memories because it was a beautiful day'. She talked about a daily rituals the family have developed: **'my son's ashes are kept in a teddy bear, and every night I pick up the bear, give him a cuddle and kiss his nose'**. She also talked about her son often



playing with the bear, and shortly will take the bear to get a Santa photo taken for Christmas.

Another parent talked about wanting a **'celebration of (her child's) life'** and so she and her husband worked with Pastoral Care services to plan

and hold a naming ceremony for her son while he was in hospital. She and her family have continued to commemorate their child on the same day every year, by **'lighting a candle, eating cake and spending time together'**. She discussed the changing nature of the ritual and how in the beginning a number of friends and family members were involved but **'they've dropped off over the years and now it is me and (my husband) and some family members'** who meet each year for the naming day anniversary.

Others talked about the changing nature of rituals over time. One parent told the group how early on journaling and writing was her ritual for her son, but that she **'no longer feels the urge to journal and write, and this has caused me a lot of guilt as the journaling represented connection'**. But then she realised that **'now I connect with him differently, especially in the way I parent my other**

son'. This prompted the group to talk about how **'the things we do to remember change over time and the connection changes'**. One parent talked about how initially the family would eat cake, and then cupcakes to honour their child, but now they **'go away for the night as a family as we felt that over the Christmas period things get so busy he was lost, so removing ourselves and going away gave us space to celebrate him'**.

Another parent talked of how initially her rituals were **'very regimented which helped me to cope'** but now they have **'evolved to include little things which keep his memory alive'**. Others told of how initially their rituals were quite public and done with a group, such as arranging for all their friends to go and see the new **'Toy Story'** movie as this series of movies was their son's favourite. However, over time

they have changed to more private rituals, such as sitting alone or with each other on a bench which has a plaque commemorating their child, in a beautiful park. Another ritual was **'putting his favourite movie on in the background at home as that's how I know he's there'**. Other daily rituals people talked about were **'talking to and kissing his photos on the fridge'** or **'putting butterflies everywhere in the house and garden'**.



Rituals were talked about as a way of involving siblings.

A parent said **‘on his anniversary just the four of us, mum, dad and his siblings go to the cemetery and have a nice day together’**. She also talked about how the former helipad at the Royal Children’s Hospital has become a special place for the family as their son was taken there close to the end of his life and there are photos of him there, so the siblings feel a strong connection to that place. They also talked about how this changes over time as **‘it gets hard when the siblings start school and can no longer take a whole day off school’**. Others talked about how now their daughter is older **‘she doesn’t want to necessarily take the whole day off school for the anniversary any more’**.

The group talked about special objects which become part of rituals, a teddy bear or bunny

which belonged to their child travelling with them in their handbag or being present in photos. Watching the child’s favourite movie, dressing up as the child’s favourite character or buying toys that the child enjoyed were also talked about. One parent said **‘my car is covered in Lightning McQueen stickers because my son loved the movie Cars’**, and talked about other children loving the car everywhere he drives it.

Other things which were discussed as having special significance for some parents were the hand sanitiser used by hospital staff because the smell of it reminded them of their child and brought back strong memories, and being very upset when the brand of hand sanitiser used by the hospital changed. Special songs were also talked about as a way of



feeling close to or remembering their child, and one parent told of how when she's in her car by herself she turns a special song up loud and sings and cries and uses this opportunity to connect with

Some parents talked about experiencing a loss in their connection with the hospital after their child's death: **'we were here all the time, it was a place of hope, but afterwards there were no more**



her child and her emotions. Another parent talked about getting a tattoo on each anniversary, and feeling that the pain of the tattoo connected him with his son. Others talked about how watching certain television shows, or coming to the hospital was a way of getting in touch with the pain of the loss and that this was sometimes comforting **'because after so long it reminds me that it was real and I haven't lost the connection'**.

appointments', and **'you're out of the club'**, and **'you lose that connection to people who knew your child'**. However, coming to the group was also identified by some parents as a ritual connecting them with their child and also the hospital -the group **'provides a space for me to think about and talk about him, the time and space to sit with him and share a story'**. Some parents talked of rituals of visiting the hospital to have a coffee, or go to the ward, or sending cake to staff

on the wards who cared for their child. The hospital was talked of as a **'powerful place of rituals'**.

In conclusion, rituals were seen by the group to be important parts of their ongoing connection with their children. One parent said **'there are so many rituals I do in my day, as it is a part of my daily life- the daily, monthly and yearly rituals that get me through'**. Another parent said **'there is so much more to rituals than just a ritual. The word ritual sounds so structured but it is what you do every day- you do activities that you think they will like'**. They talked about how some rituals **'you don't even realise you do them, it's comforting now to think about them'**. Another person said **'some days you feel guilt if you feel no connection or see a sign of your child, but now I see that every day I do something which shares a connection with him'**.



Many thanks to the
parents
who shared
their stories, experiences
and wisdom with us
and allowed us to use
their
stories to write
this newsletter



Parents' Bereavement Support Group Meetings 2020

Venue: *The RCH Foundation Board Room
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road
PARKVILLE VIC 3052
(Lifts via The Larwill Studio main entrance)*

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

Monthly Parents' Bereavement Support Group

February 20th

March 19th

April 16th

May 21st

June 18th

July 16th

August 20th

September 17th

October 15th

November 19th

December 10th (please note this is a week earlier due to Christmas)

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 12 December 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 Empty Chair: Grief and Celebrations

Please Join us in December

*The newsletter is always a team effort.
Thank you to Nicola Watt for facilitating the group discussion and
writing the newsletter. Thank you to
Jasmyne Mack for scribing parents' statements.
Also to Marina Puljic for ensuring the
newsletter is typed, formatted, collated and distributed
to interested people.*

