

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER July 2019



Welcome to the July 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.

“Connecting with your Child and Looking after Yourself via Music and Imagery”

This month RCH Music Therapist Melina Roberts joined us to lead the group in the topic: “Connecting with your Child and Looking after Yourself via Music and Imagery”.

After introductions Melina talked to the group about the principles of mindfulness, and the usefulness of mindfulness techniques in difficult times and also as a way of looking after self on a day to day basis. Members of the group have had varied experience of mindfulness in the past, some having previously attended retreats and others who have used mindfulness apps etc. Whilst a number of parents indicated during

introductions that they were struggling with the intensity of their grief in various ways, including several significant anniversaries approaching, as the session progressed group members were able to create together an atmosphere of care and quiet reflection. In this newsletter we will try to capture the flow of the session via parents’ words and associations as they navigated the music, imagery and drawing.

Melina led participants in a mindfulness exercise, starting with focus on deep breathing, and then choosing an image that “brings you strength”, as



a track of piano music was played. When the music stopped and participants emerged from the mindfulness exercise, they were invited to create a mandala with pastel crayons, thinking of an image that connected them with their child. Group members all participated in this, creating a series of images as varied as their children.



Parents were then invited to speak about their response to the music exercise, and/or their mandalas.

One mother who stated she generally “dreaded art and drawing” nevertheless had created a vivid rainbow on her mandala. She described how rainbows are a very significant symbol for her family, symbolising her daughter saying “hello”. At the funeral the song “Somewhere over the Rainbow” was played, and friends often send photos of rainbows to

acknowledge a sense of her child’s continuing presence.

A father had filled his mandala with the Yin-Yang symbol, signifying the duality of he and his partner’s life since their child’s death. He showed us the dark and the light, the happiness and sadness depicted in the image. Yellow is his son’s colour, and at the time of his birth and death wattle trees were blossoming and the yellow he used in his mandala was a reference to this. There were also feathery brown parts, representing eagle feathers and particularly Bunjil, the protective eagle of aboriginal culture, “connecting us to the earth”.

One mother spoke of how the music exercise was challenging for her at first due to the sound of an ambulance outside at one point, which she found extremely stressful. However she was able to persevere, and showed us her mandala, full of blue water tones. She described how she drew strength from water and through remembering times with her child in water, which calmed and settled him, and having a shower with him

on the morning he died, while everyone else was asleep.

Another parent had associations with the piano music used in the exercise, sharing a wry laugh with the group as she remembered her child who played piano but was “never very good”. The memories were “bitter sweet” as she listened to the music, thought of those times and drew strength from thinking about her daughter dancing to classical music. The beach featured in her mandala and both she and her husband spoke about times spent at the beach when their child



was well, happy images and happy times for their family.

The facilitator commented on the diversity in the drawings, reflecting

the diversity of group participants' children.

One mother spoke about how listening to classical music reminded her of one of her work-places. Whilst the words of songs on the radio make her cry and always seem to relate to her child, “because that is grief”, classical music is “soothing” to her now. She drew the family’s garden, “our child’s park”, and stated this is how she sees heaven, meeting him in their park: “I miss you; I’ll wait for you forever”.

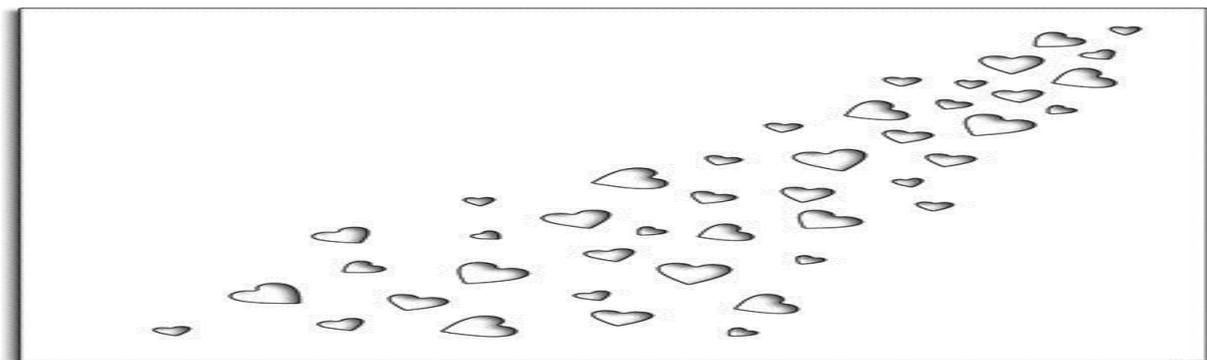
Another mother talked about how the music had brought her back to the classical music they played on the ward, and which the nurses would comment on. That music was playing at the time of their son’s death, which they filmed. Afterwards she sought out the songs and she and her husband play them at home a lot. Whilst in the mindfulness exercise she could see her son’s sleeping face, she said she couldn’t draw the “I miss you”



which she felt, in a way that filled the mandala, rather she wrote these words in the tiny centre with the great wide circle around them, saying “I feel like my grief is so big and I miss him so much all the time but I feel like a little person passing by in a big world”. This mother’s husband then talked about his mandala, which contained a drawing of the cemetery where they visit their son: “It’s always sunny there”. He drew the balloons which

nant, saying that they loved him “to the moon and back”. When they drove home after his death, having not been home for some time, they sat in the car gathering up courage to go in, saw a massive moon in the sky and thought “He’s telling us he’s there and he’s safe”.

A mother then showed her mandala which depicted the sea, stating that she found comfort in being near the ocean. For her its sound and the



they let go at his son’s funeral, that got stuck in a tree, (once again the group shared laughter) and the magpies that come down when they visit. He commented that another parent had identified that magpies are “messengers”.

Another parent talked about the book “Guess how much I love you”, remembering how she and her husband read this to her son every night when she was preg-

sight and colour of the sky bring her solace.

A father showed a sunflower mandala which brought associations to his son. “We planted sunflowers and had them at his funeral. He’d call them ‘happy flowers’. People send us photos of sunflowers”.

Melina then guided group participants through a relaxation piece with the goal of “looking

after ourselves”. She asked parents to conjure an image that would help them get through the next day. After this relaxation piece parents shared the thoughts that had come up for them and their associations with pieces of familiar music. These included many feelings and memories of connection as well as thoughts of being reunited, one mother saying “I saw heaven and my child running towards me; I told her I’ve been waiting here”. Melina talked about how, though music can bring up multiple feelings, each person has music that can be soothing for them, and encouraged parents to utilise music, breathing and imagery exercises at home to sustain themselves.

As the group approached its end the facilitator asked group participants to think about how they would look after themselves following this group and in the days to come. One mother talked about how others in her town who have been through a similar experience tell her to be kind and gentle with herself, and how she struggles with this as “I don’t know what that means. I need to

find ways to be lighter”. Several other parents agreed that this was a challenge for them. Some parents suggested possible ways to find this lighter feeling: “Give yourself a hug. Give yourself a break. Cut yourself some slack. Do something for yourself”. However this is not always easy; as one parent commented it can be so hard to take yourself away from things when necessary, that your “intentions are good but others don’t always understand”. One father talked about how he cares for himself by riding his motorbike: “Putting my helmet on blocks out the world” - and humorously suggested perhaps everyone should get themselves a motorbike.

In finishing one mother spoke about the very particular function the group has for her, which makes it hard sometimes to leave. “When you’re here and with people who get it, when you leave you feel like you’re leaving a bubble. I hate the phrase ‘it’s hard’, but it’s *so* hard and you can’t explain it [to those who haven’t experienced it]. Some people try to imagine what it’s like but they can’t know”. Sometimes

you have to “dig so deep to get up the next day and go again”. She described how, when it is coming up to time for the group to meet again, she wants to come but it hurts as well. Yet she feels good in attending as in the group she is able to feel “normal again”. What helps her in the group is “other people’s strength”. She observed “when I’m here everyone is without; when I’m outside, everyone is with”.

In the face of this, sharing with other parents who are traversing a similar grief is very important but the challenge is how to hold on to what group members give to each other, and carry some of that with you in going back out into the world.

This month’s group was a space for being gentle with self and each other, not avoiding grief but utilising music and imagery to find some space to traverse it and find connection. Thanks to all the parents who attended and shared so eloquently with each other through their responses, the images they created and their words.



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.



*We thank everyone in the group
for sharing their experiences
and wisdom and for accepting the
feelings and thoughts of others
without judgement or criticism.
We also thank you for allowing us
to share your conversations
and comments with the wider
audience who reads this
newsletter.*

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 15th August 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:

Looking after yourself each day; who and what can you draw on to help you?

Please join us in July

*The newsletter is always a team effort.
Thank you to Robyn Clark for facilitating the group discussion and
writing the newsletter. Thank you to Melina Roberts for guiding this group in music and mindfulness,
And to Sophie Harris for scribing parents' statements.
Also to the Administration team for mailing assistance & to Marina Puljic for ensuring the
newsletter is typed, formatted, collated and distributed
to interested people.*

