

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER MARCH 2019



Welcome to the March 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.

“Cultural expectations and understanding of grief - how they can help or hinder individual grief”

The topic for the March group was about how culture helps or hinders our expressions and experiences of grief. Culture can be a society expectation, religious rituals and understandings or may relate to a family's way of behaviour and understandings. The parents who attended the March group spoke openly and honestly about their beliefs about why their child had lived and died the way they did, about their religious beliefs or lack thereof and about how these beliefs had helped or hindered them in their grieving. Within the group people held diverse beliefs about life, death and what happens after death but there was genuine interest in and respect for the views, experiences and beliefs of all those present.

Not everyone in the group held a belief about a 'higher being' or a Christian God.



However one parent told us that although he and his wife did not have any Christian beliefs, when their son was fighting for his life in the intensive care unit they both prayed intensely – **“We prayed every day, even though we didn't believe in God. We promised anything – we would be the best disciples in the world, spreading 'the word' everywhere....anything if our child could live”**. He also spoke about their anger with God when their baby died. Several of the other parents also spoke of being angry with God regardless of how strong their faith had been before their child passed away. Some have been unable to return to church since the death of their child while others have continued to attend. One parent with a strong belief in heaven told us that when she was in church after her child had passed

away she was feeling very angry with God and looked up at the crucifix and thought: **"How can I be angry with you (God) when you're the one I need to care for my daughter until I get there"**. Another parent told us that he was reluctant to have his second child baptised, as he didn't want God to see her in case he wanted to take her as well.

Understandings of what happens to you after death varied in the group although most of those present believed their child was in heaven or some form of paradise. A parent shared with us a belief of life and death they had learned from a Hindu family and which they have found helpful. **"When we were crying or very upset, they told us we should not cry as we were slowing down our child's journey.**

He had achieved what he needed to achieve and was now on a journey to nirvana or paradise and when we cried or were very distressed we were hindering him on this journey as he was being drawn back to us". Their friend explained that while it was okay to grieve for their child and be sad they should not let their grief be so overwhelming that they would hold their child back on his journey. In this belief, it is understood that the child chooses the parents. Everyone has lessons to learn and to teach and will be reincarnated until this has been

achieved, after which the soul will be free to travel to its final destination and paradise. This child knew he needed only 6 weeks to learn or teach his final lesson and he chose the parents he needed to do this. While his parents continue to feel great sadness, they also feel joy in nature and the beauty of the world around them and feel privileged that their child chose them to be his parents. **"I feel perhaps the lesson he had to teach was for us to find joy and love in life. I feel joy in so many things but I still feel great sadness – the joy and the sadness can be there alongside each other"**. Some of the other

parents in the group agreed that you can feel great sadness but also feel joy at the same time and that most people do not understand this.

A parent said:

"Yes, we are all masters of coexistence". Parents spoke of finding joy in nature and in the memories of their child. One parent commented on the beautiful birdsong we could hear at that moment but also the sirens that were co-existing with the beauty of the birdsong.

Along a similar vein a couple told us that they had a wonderful GP who saw them very frequently in the time immediately after their child passed away and was very generous with his time. He told them that their son **"has passed all his tests and exams"** and



that was why he was able to leave them so quickly. The parents were unsure about how comforting this explanation was but the compassion and generosity of the GP was certainly hugely helpful in those early days of intense grief. Sometimes the relationship is more important than the words.

There were parents in the group who did not have any religious or spiritual beliefs. One parent told us that she struggles because she does not feel or believe that her child is in heaven. When another parent asked her where she pictures her child, she said: **"I don't know, I don't picture him anywhere. Sometimes I convince myself I can feel him in the house and I talk to him, but when I am being really honest I know I am lying to myself"**. She told us in the first year after her child had passed away she would become very angry when other people, particularly her family tried to impose on her their beliefs about heaven, an afterlife or the reason her son lived only a short life. She explained that she has a large and very culturally diverse family so there is a wide range of beliefs and understandings in her family. She said that now more time has passed she no longer becomes angry but is pleased that they find comfort in their beliefs even if she does not agree with them. She said that she and her partner talk about their child every day. **"Perhaps that is what I believe, that the child is still present when you remember them and talk about them"**. This belief is certainly prominent in the Mexican celebrations and beliefs about the day of the dead. These parents had begun to celebrate this day themselves.

Another parent also told us she does not believe in religion or heaven and does not believe her child is in heaven or anywhere else. **"I know he is in the plot in the cemetery buried 6 feet down"**. She said she is aware that some people find this quite confronting as she is **"expected to believe he is in a better place"**. Like the other parent, she believes he lives in her memories of him. **"I remember him by trying to fill my days doing things for him that I would be doing if he were still alive. I think I have rearranged his room 50 times"**. She said her partner does come from a Christian belief system and is very angry with God.

As we continued to share beliefs about what happens after death several parents told us that they believe in heaven and strongly believe that their child is living there. One parent told us how she worried when her baby died that there was no one in heaven to look after him. All her grandparents were still living. Her husband reminded her that two of his cousins were there to look after him. She went on to tell us that when they attended the wedding of the sibling of one of these cousins it was acknowledged that there were significant family members not present. At that time she saw two dragonflies and 2 white butterflies flying together amongst the people. She was reassured that those 'missing people' were present – the 2 dragonflies were the 2 cousins and the white butterflies her son and another baby



relative who had died after her son had passed. She told us that since her son's death 3 of her 4 grandparents have also died. She said that although she was sad to lose these loved people, she also felt some relief that they would now be able to look after her son. Other parents also talked about wanting to know there was a relative in heaven to care for their child.

Throughout the group parents spoke of signs of their child's presence. For some of the parents butterflies held significance. One parent told us how their older son also identified butterflies with the presence of his brother. **"We were driving along past a field where there were a lot of butterflies and he would say 'there is (brother)' every time he saw another butterfly"**. Another parent strongly connects her daughter's presence with rainbows. She told a lovely story of a message she received from a friend of her daughter's complaining about a boring math class she was in, then the friend said she looked out the window and saw a rainbow and felt her friend was there. One more recently bereaved mother told us that she could not feel her child's presence in anything as she felt every time she found a symbol that could have meaning for her **"others were taking it away from me they try to put their own perspectives on my grief"**. She told us at her son's funeral there was a double rainbow in the sky. One of the other people at the funeral had recently experienced the death of their dog. This person said to her "look, one rainbow for (the dog) and one for the child". For this parent, this statement robbed her of the opportunity to remember her son in rainbows. A parent told us how, after her child died his toys would mysteriously turn on or move in their home.

Rainbows, butterflies, dragonflies were some of the symbols that parents strongly associate with their child's spirit although many parents have other symbols that have significance for them.

A couple told us how emotionally difficult they were finding it to book their new child into a childcare centre. When they took her to the childcare centre their son had attended they were please to see that his photo was still on the wall even though most of the staff had changed. As they were trying to feel okay about filling in the paperwork a butterfly flew around their child's face then past each of them. They felt very comforted by this as they felt it was their son telling them it will be okay. In the photo of their child in the centre he is smiling and pointing at something not in the picture – he is pointing at a butterfly.



Parents spoke of feeling comfort or joy when someone else remembers their child, speaks to them of their child or tells their child's story. One child had been present when a Christian singer attended her school. He invited her to come onto the stage and dance with him. A few weeks later she passed away. She has kept in touch with this writer/singer since then. He recently contacted her to see if she would be

happy for him to tell her child's story when he presents at a large Christian conference in LA. The mother is so pleased that her daughter's story continues to be told – **"My daughter taught me so much when she was alive and she continues to teach people even though she has passed on"**.

Children have a particular way of seeing the world that adults cannot always share. A parent told us the story of a little girl who regularly comes to the cemetery with her grandmother and is attracted to her child's grave. She brings him toys and plays with his ball. She worries if she is not there, asking her grandmother where the child's mother is and why isn't she there with him. Apparently this little girl talks about him at school and has even written him a letter. The mother marvelled at the relationship this child has developed with her son when she never met him. Another parent said that she is convinced that children have a different connection with those who have passed away than any adult. Another parent said they believe that people who are close to death can see and communicate with those who have died and are waiting for them. She said people who work in palliative care have also told her this. A parent in the group told us about the last time he visited his grandfather after his son had passed away and his daughter had been born. The grandfather was suffering from dementia, and kept looking past him over his shoulder and asking who was behind him. When another relative visited later

in the day his grandfather told her that he had received a visit from this family – mother and father, baby girl and a little boy looking over the father's shoulder. He has since passed away. Some parents told us that their daughter, not yet one year old recognises her brother's photo and has started to say her brother's name.



A number of parents have visited a medium. These experiences have brought comfort to them in a variety of ways. One parent has been told by her daughter via the medium that the angels have a big book which no one is allowed to look inside. The mother understands that this is the book of life in which everyone's life is recorded and is therefore predetermined. This understanding that her daughter lived the life she was supposed to and nothing could have changed that has brought her comfort and some freedom from the guilt she felt that perhaps she could have done more to save her. She said: **"this does not mean I will not have some serious questions for the big man when I get there"**. Another parent told us that the medium told him that his grandfather had made sure that it was him who found their son when he died

and that this was as it was supposed to be. The medium also told him that their son 'shot up like a rocket' – **"This gives me some comfort as I believe this means that his death was quick and painless"**. It is also comforting to know that the child's great grandfather is there to look after the child.

Being accepted as part of a bereaved community is not a common experience in Australian culture. A parent who goes to the cemetery regularly told us that one day there was a large gathering of people from an orthodox faith clearly there to remember their family members who had passed away, tidying graves, laying flowers and sharing food. Although she was not part of this community she was automatically and naturally acknowledged as also bereaved and people came up to her and shared the food they had brought. This was a very affirming experience for her.

There was also discussion about how experiencing the death of your child changes your perspective on life and may also change the perspectives of others. One father who had been working as a primary school teacher told us he used to ask the children to rate how they were going from 0 – 10 with 0 being awful and 10 being wonderful. He said: **"Everyone's zero is different. Before we lost our son there was always a group of children who would say they were zero. When I went back after we lost him I asked them to do the rating but said, 'you all**

know what my zero is'. The children who had always been zeros now all moved to 2's". Another mother told us that she has become the person people tell their most difficult stories to. She said: **"nothing can shock me anymore so they know they can tell me anything and I won't be shocked but will just ask what we are going to do about it"**.

The discussion this night had been wide ranging and moving with differing beliefs and understandings across the group. It was clear that discussing death and grief in mainstream Australia is not something that is widely accepted. Responses to sharing the story of your child, even saying that you have a child who has passed away range from immediate flight of the listener, obvious discomfort, apologies for even asking at one end of the spectrum to giving a heartfelt hug at the other end. We hope this group is a safe space to share your thoughts, experiences, pain and even despair with others who can understand and can tolerate the intensity of these emotions.

As always, deep thanks to those who attended the group and shared so honestly, listened so genuinely and allowed this newsletter to be written and shared with such a wide audience.

Straight from the Heart



"We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world- the company of those who have known suffering.

" Hellen Keller

"Love is the only thing we can possess, keep with us and take with us".

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

"Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything".

C.S. Lewis

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 18th April 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:

“Including your child in Easter rituals “

Please join us in April

The newsletter is always a team effort.

Thank you to Helen Stewart for facilitating, guiding the group discussion and writing the newsletter and to Jack Southwell for scribing parents' statements.

Also to Administration team for mailing assistance & to Marina Puljic for ensuring the newsletter is typed, formatted, collated and distributed to interested people.

