

**FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT  
PROGRAMME**  
Social Work Department  
**NEWSLETTER OCTOBER 2021**



Welcome to the October bereavement group newsletter.  
We hope this newsletter brings you a sense of connection with other bereaved parents.

**‘Grieving together: A couple’s perspective’**

Jill Dzadey, relationship counsellor and social worker was a guest speaker at the October group. She led the group discussion on how to navigate grief within intimate relationships. In the group we had 2 couples and 2 parents who were separated from their previous partners.

Following the parent introductions, Jill introduced herself and told the group she works part time as a social worker at the RCH in the cardiac unit and works privately as a relationship counsellor. She started the discussion for the evening by asking people to do an exercise – ‘Imagine you are in your car en route to a job interview in an area with which you are not familiar and the petrol light on your car comes on. What would you do? Would you panic, swear, call someone, be calm and rational etc? Now imagine what your partner would do’. There were a variety of responses in the group – **“I would panic but I would be reassured as I would**

**have left the house early to attend the interview and there would be time to rectify the situation”**. Another response: **“I would call people, panic, be hysterical”**. Some people would blame their partner and others would take responsibility themselves. Most of the people in the group felt their partner’s response would be different to their own. Jill then asked if they would tell their partner about what happened when they got home. Again there were different responses with one parent saying if it was her partner’s fault there was no petrol in the car she would tell him and let him know how angry she was.

Jill then used these differing responses to start a discussion about how couples manage their grief experiences. Jill talked about ‘grief lanes’ and how we are all in our own lanes on our grief journey. The challenge within relationships is for each couple to integrate their experiences and emotions with one another. Jill said that some couples feel as though they are on the same page initially and are a



team to begin with, then gradually over time they can lose sight of the other person and not know how to support them. Clashes can occur when we can't understand what is going on with the other person nor they with us, and this is at a time when we are at our most vulnerable and isolated and are desperate for connection.

Jill talked about different responses to grief that can be associated with gender but this is not always the case. In general, women are expressive, they seek connection, validation and comfort by expressing themselves, their thoughts and their feelings. Men on the other hand are often instrumental in their grief. They intrinsically experience grief and are more inclined to pour themselves into activity and work and are less able to express and articulate their feelings.

As a result of these different grieving styles, people often feel misunderstood and feel they are not getting what they need from their partners or others close to them. Parents in the group could identify with these differing



ways of expressing grief and agreed that they and their partners did not express their grief in the same ways.

Jill said nothing can prepare you for the death of your child; there are no manuals to guide you through it. You know how you feel and your partner knows how they feel but sometimes these feelings do not align. Death changes you, you are not the same, you can't be the same. You change as individuals, as a couple and as parents. Parents try to compare themselves with how they were before, but this is not realistic. Because

you have changed as an individual, you have also changed as a couple. The death of a child is a trauma and this tests relationships with many not surviving. One parent said: **“If the relationship was already rocky then it doesn't stand a chance”**. She told us that her relationship had not been great before the death of their child and how she decided that she had been through the worst thing that could ever happen to her and she was not going to put up with an unsatisfactory relationship any longer. Now she has her own home and has shared care of their son but she told the group how difficult it had been to do this.

Jill explained that couples are often not very good communicating their emotions and what they need with each other. Couples need to understand how the other manages their emotions.

One of the parents told us how she and her partner had been to counselling after their child's death. **“When the counsellor asked him about grief he said I would go into her room and cry and he said he would leave me to cry in the room. I said ‘No,**

**I don't want you to leave me, I want you to come in and give me a hug’. All I wanted was for him to hug me and tell me it is shit”**.

Jill suggested that a way to improve communication is to create a ‘check in’ space, to make a time and space to check in with each other and talk about how you are going. This could be formal or informal, could be scheduled monthly or on a more ad hoc basis, but this time does need to be prioritised. In a relationship it's not me, it's we. Having this mindset creates empathy and communication and it is easier to acknowledge and affirm each other's feelings.

One of the parents asked how you do this 'check in' and Jill suggested that you might notice that you and your partner are not on the same page and you might need to suggest you organise a time to check in to communicate thoughts and feelings. She said it is like when there is a crisis at work and you organise a meeting to regroup with your colleagues, debrief, discuss what is going on and come up with a plan. It is the same with your partner. A couple said: **“When we used to attend the group at the hospital we really benefitted from the time we spent together driving to the hospital and home again after the group. The journey was a short respite from caring for the other children and enabled us to connect. A night just for us, like a date night, only a bereavement night”**. Jill said, if you're not putting time and effort into the relationship nothing's going to change. You have to invest and it has to be intentional. Sometimes there are just not the words to express what you are feeling or you may not feel like talking, so doing something together that you both enjoy is also positive for your relationship. It may be going for a walk together, cooking together, seeing friends – things that help you to get energy from each other. So perhaps in a relationship you need to make time for affirming and fun things to do together as well as time to sit together and have what may be difficult, honest conversations about what you each are experiencing and need from the other. The death of your child is a unique experience and, as one parent said: **“When 2 people lose the same child, no one else will experience the magnitude of that loss”**.

In discussing the relationship with ex-partners one parent who has been separated for some years said that she knows he still is feeling the grief of the loss of their child so she sends him a message on his birthday and Father's Day every year, acknowledging that it is a difficult day and she is sure their child is shining down on him. He never responds to the messages and nor does he send her an equivalent

message on her birthday or Mother's Day. She said: **“It's hard to understand why he can't put himself in my shoes like I can put myself in his”**. Another separated parent told us; **“It's just the opposite for me. He sends me messages all the time and I never respond. If I do he will think we might be able to get together again”**. In this situation, the meaning of the messages, or the motivation in sending them, seems to be quite different.

We spoke about family and friends and how they understand grief and the needs of grieving parents. One father said: **“Even the smallest gestures from friends and family on birthdays, anniversaries, Mother's/Father's days means the world”**. They also told us that a rainbow has become a symbol of their child and members of their family group chat send pictures of rainbows, rainbow emojis and take photos of rainbows whenever they see them. The light spectrum on a wall reflected off a light is a reminder of the child. They even get the same temporary tattoo on his birthday. As Jill said, they are sharing the journey.

Others talked about their child's constant presence among their family. **“He's always mentioned, he's always there”**. The whole family knows how appreciated this acknowledgement is. This parent commented that there is a difference between an expected death and a sudden, unexpected death. When the death is expected **“it is less of a shock, you are more prepared, so the response of others is more palatable.....We talk about him generally day-to-day, but not necessarily the grief and loss”**. They spoke about talking about the good memories, not so much the grief. A father talked about how his mother was constantly checking in with him in the early days and he was constantly reassuring her he was okay. There were persistent check ins from family members. He said: **“Two years ago it was almost cathartic getting that sad and deep, now I don't want to have that same heavy feeling”**. An-

other parent responded: **“It’s good to dip into the pain sometimes, it grounds you, but nobody likes pain”**. Timing is important but other people don’t always know what sort of a day you are having and what you need on that day. One parent told us: **“Sometimes family want and are more prepared for deep conversations but I would prefer not to cry that day. Also, I would rather confide in my partner than my family”**.

As time goes on reactions of others as well as the parent can change. A parent told us of the changing reaction of her father. **“At the beginning we just needed someone to blame and my father and I were questioning everything that happened, what time things happened, we were really together and talked about it all the time. Now he finds it really hard to talk about her and about his grief.....he is grieving but just can’t talk about it”**. The grief of a grand parent is like a double whammy – they are grieving for their child and the pain they are experiencing but also for the loss of their grandchild. Even more difficult for great grand parents. A parent told us how her great grand parent could not come to terms with the fact that their great grandchild had died before them and just kept saying “It should have been me, it should have been me”. As one parent said regarding burying your child/grandchild, great-grandchild - **“It’s just not how it’s supposed to be”**.

Maintaining friendships with your child’s friends or their parents can be really hard. You want to see them but seeing the children

grow up and hit various milestones when your child didn’t can be jarring. Seeing a friend of your child get their licence, turn 21 when your child never even got to secondary school is difficult - **“It doesn’t make sense in your head, it never will”**. A parent is still in the chat group for her child’s school year. She spoke about how she wonders what she would be contributing to the ideas in the group if her child was still there as they plan for the final year of primary school next year. Her next child will soon exceed her son’s years of school. Another parent in the group had experienced this milestone and said: **“You need to prepare yourself for those anniversaries. It is a cold shock in your body, it’s like another grief in itself”**. She told us how anxious her son was when he reached the age his sister was when she died – anxious that the same thing could happen to him. She went on to say – **“We in the group appreciate life is too short. Because we’ve already had trauma in our lives we want to**

**put our children in a bubble. I am over the top, I overreact, I tell him I love him all the time because you never know if it will be the last time you get the chance”**. One of the other parents told us how she is anxious about sending her children back to school – **“COVID makes me nervous, the highest rates of infections are in under 12’s. I don’t understand why people won’t get vaccinated. Shit stuff happens, so why don’t you do everything you can to avoid it”**?



To finish up the group, Jill asked how the

people in the group would describe grief. One parent said: **“It’s like a tsunami, sometimes the water’s fine and the waves are just lapping, other times they are huge and unpredictable and you are drowning and you can’t get back up”**. Another parent said: **“You’ll feel happy and sad at the same time for the rest of your life. With every happy situation that you are celebrating, there is always an element of pain as someone’s missing and is not experiencing it as well”**. And another comment: **“I will always feel broken, like a piece of me is missing, I’m not whole. That doesn’t mean you can’t keep going”**. And advice from another

parent: **“Be kind to yourself, accept it, however difficult it is”**. Finally, a parent said: **“Learn how to navigate this road of grief”**

We hope that this group and the discussion with Jill will help you as you navigate this unpredictable, winding and challenging road of grief.

### ***Topic for the November group:***

***The impact of grief on relationships with children and young people in your life. Following the loss of a child the relationship with other children and young people in your life may also change. Seeing other children growing up to achieve milestones and experiences your child did not, keeping the memory of your child present in your family, honouring your child in family celebrations, talking to your children about their sibling and so many other things can take on new meaning and significance. We hope to be able to explore these issues with you in the November group.***

*I would like to thank the parents who participated in this group, for their open and honest sharing.*

*If you have any ideas or topics you would like to suggest for future groups, please email them to us – we want the group to be as relevant and helpful as we all can make it.*

*I hope all who attended the group and all who are reading this newsletter have found something that resonates and helps a little in your journey.*

## *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](mailto:Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au)

The next meeting of the  
Family Bereavement Support Evening Group (Via Zoom)

**Thursday 18th November 2021 at 7.30pm**

Please join us to discuss the topic:

**'The impact of grief on relationships with children and young people  
in your life'**

If you wish to attend this group please

email: [Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au](mailto:Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au)



The newsletter is always a team effort.  
Thank you to Helen Stewart for facilitating the group discussion and writing the newsletter,  
Thank you also to Jill Dzadey, who was our guest speaker  
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**Social Work Department, RCH**



