FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER MAY 2023

"Expressing grief: different ways, different times, different people"

May's bereavement group was attended by fourteen parents, who shared their stories and reflected on the topic: *Expressing Grief: different ways, different times, different people.* The group participants ranged from those who have been navigating grief for many years since their child died, to several whose children had died more recently, and for whom the grief was still very raw.

After introducing themselves and sharing some brief introductory thoughts about their child, we began to think about the topic for the evening. One mother began the conversation by saying that, for her, expressing grief was best done through rituals. After several years, she still visits the cemetery and finds this extremely helpful as it provides a structure to her grieving each day. Others in her world have not always understood this, but it is what helps her in her grieving, her remembering and paying homage to her child, that is important. Another mother responded to her words saying that **"you have to cope in your own way - it doesn't matter what others think".** She expressed that one of the dilemmas about grieving is how you can still have a sense of parenting your child, and that the ritual at the cemetery was a way of continuing to do this.

Many others in the group took up this theme of rituals and their function in expressing grief. One mother related how she expresses her grief through music – that when she plays certain music she connects with the songs as if she is **"talking to [her son]".** On the way to the group session she was wondering to herself

how she had ever managed to drive home after leaving him at the hospital. As she was wondering this, a song, seemingly connected with her thought, came on: **"In the middle of the ride, 'everything will be ok'".**

Sometimes dolls, toys or other objects can become a focus for expressing grief or connecting with your child. One mother has her child's ashes in a teddy bear which she says goodnight to every night and on anniversaries sleeps with in her bed. Another has her child's ashes in the cot upstairs - he is the first person she says good morning to and the last at night. Though he is not physically there, she feels his presence, and this brings comfort to her, as do photos of her son. Several parents related to the ritual of morning and evening greetings to their child, as the "first and last" thing they do each day. Another ritual one mother uses is to pick up any feathers that might fall in her path, which she connects with her foster son. Though her husband was not sure what to think about this at first, now he has also begun picking them up for her. Lighting candles and kissing the teddy bear has been a ritual helping acknowledgement of their child and expressing to others in the family that it's alright to talk to him. For other children and grandchildren who have been born since, it is painful to think they didn't know him, and it is **"up to us" to tell them about him".**

For different parents, there are different languages for expressing grief. Whilst some use music or verbally express how they feel, others construct places of homage for their child. One mother described an alter she has constructed for her child, with a chest full of photos of her daughter, where she goes to light a candle, sit and be with her, often meditating there too. The younger brother (three years) sometimes sits there too but **"doesn't understand it"** and often cries at night. Their mother expressed that in a way, everything she does is in honour of her daughter, even playing with her son. She described that **"life gets wedged into grief",** that maybe one day there will be **"more life and less grief",** but the grief feels like it will always be **"wedged there".** The father in this family, also participating in the group, said that the hardest thing was working out how to forge a new relationship with his daughter: **"At first I was really angry, with the photos, the candles, the rituals"** (which his partner had taken up). Whilst she focuses on photos and videos of her child, almost wanting to **"absorb"** her daughter, he could not manage this. Then, over time he says he realized that the nature of what has happened cannot be changed. He now talks to his daughter, acknowledges her and in this finds a way to express his parenting of her. In this way the rituals can **"Chanell the parenting".** We acknowledged that each partner's way of grieving is different, that there is not one right way, and the ways people find sometimes only work at the **"right time"** for them.

Another mother took up the same theme of different parental grieving, sharing how she tended often to be detained in her thoughts **with "what ifs…"** whereas the father of the child, her partner, would say "you can't change it" and attempt to keep moving forward. This mother stated that in some ways they had each taken on something of each other's grief styles – "it's not that one is better". She also brought up that how you grieve can be related to your different sides of the family

– your family of origin. Each family style is different as is, sometimes, each member of the family, and who you choose to share your grief with is sometimes dependant on these differences. There was lengthy talk in the group as to whom parents felt most comfortable to speak with. One father stated that for him there had been a process of losing friends following his child's death. One enduring friend of 25 years had come to the funeral, but offered no further means of connection after that. This upset and angered the father who was left not understanding – **"trust was broken".** Another parent expressed similar feelings about friends she had **"expected to be there"** who were not, and other unexpected ones who were able to be present for them. Another spoke about extended family not necessarily understanding their expectations of them: **"I didn't know you wanted me to call"** (on anniversary of her child's death). These parents described these experiences as another form of grief, secondary losses on top of the primary loss of their child: **"It's like you're grieving relationships you thought would last". "We are the same people; we've not changed".**

A recently bereaved father attending the group reflected that **"maybe it's not malice, maybe those people just don't understand what to do or say; they don't know how to react or what to do, how to respond".** He spoke about the surviving twin of his child who died, and how he also sometimes does not know what to do in terms of her grief – he wonders and worries about her. He feels she hides her tears which makes it hard for him to know how she is or what he should do. He added that, in relation to his own grief, when asked if he is ok, he doesn't always know whether to answer the question, being unsure of how the questioner might respond. Others in the group related to this dilemma.

Sometimes, though, the bereaved themselves find the courage to let people know what they need. One mother, who had attended with her husband, described her own family as **"supportive"** to the expression of her grief, but stated that her husband's side was unable to be open in their expressions at all (her husband agreed). She described how, when she was pregnant and knew of their son's condition antenatally, the paternal side of the family did not want her to tell anyone outside the family that she was pregnant. This avoidant style continued after the birth and this mother found herself over time having to guide others about what she needed in her grief, as **" I had this feeling of anger towards others – but they may not know what I'm feeling or what to do. If I'm crying it's because I'm sad or uncomfortable. Maybe I need to tell them what I need or want".** She told another mother in the room who is over ten years bereaved, that this was something she had learnt from her in past groups. She said it had helped her to make room for her son in conversation with others, some of whom are now more comfortable with him, and that this is a way of sharing him with them: **"I'll guide you through the conversation".**

On the other hand another mother spoke about how frustrating it was to have to **"teach people how to grieve" – what to say and do and how to help"** – whilst you are grieving so much yourself. However she felt she "owed it" to her son to let others know how she was feeling. A key point that she (and many other parents) want to convey to those around them, is that it's alright to still speak about your child, to say their name, and that you want to hear it. Other helpful phrases that came up were "Grieve with me" and **"Sit**

with me” – so that **“I’m not alone in this process”.**

One mother who was foster mother to her child, spoke about some of the particular aspects of her grieving experience. Because her foster child did not look like other family members it can accentuate the loss of waking up to him not being there. They use photos to remember him but more than anything, when they see his birth family it brings a sense of connection and involvement – expressing not only their grief together but also their shared love.

As often happens in the group, parents shared some of the annoying, difficult and painful things that people had said to them over time. These included: **“They are in a better place now**”, “At least you have another one and can move on now” and even **“Stop sulking”.** One parent commented that society contains a lot of “problem solvers”, but death is something that can’t be solved**. “No-one is immune to death”.** However the death of a child is especially painful and **“people don’t want to sit in pain” – they don’t want it to “be their reality”.** There followed on a discussion about the possible benefits of cultures where other children as well as adults can be more a part of the process when a child has passed away, and various forms of public expressions of grieving from rituals to representations in movies.

This led on to some sharing about how spirituality and religion can play a part in one’s grieving. Some parents spoke of particular images such as dragon flies which symbolize something of the spirit or meaning of their child. Many of the rituals parents spoke of also had a spiritual element. One parent shared how they wrote messages to their child and threw them into the firepit. Another said that she coloured her hair in different ways to honour and connect to her child. Yet another talked about her child’s connection to butterflies and how on the last time their family all spent together, they took her son to the zoo where the nurse who was present took a photo of them as they sat together on a bench. Returning to this place, to the butterflies and the bench where **“someone always asks to take a photo”** – helps them to feel his presence. The parents can watch the younger sibling grow in their love for this child, with each new year and each photo taken at the zoo. **“It connects them in a way I can’t explain”.**

Many parents spoke about **“signs”** that connected them to their child who has died. These included connections between e.g. the number of days a child was alive and the same number suddenly appearing in another context, knowledge of the child spoken of in a tarot reading, a Christmas bauble with the child’s name smashing on the floor but not breaking – and many more. Many

of the parents in the group spoke about these **"signs"** and the comfort and connection the signs bring them. One father stated that he had been searching for meaning around the death through logic, but began to read about signs and spirituality, and though a scientist, had found his belief in these phenomena growing more and more. It was acknowledged though, that not all bereaved parents have this experience. Some parents instead find great comfort in particular religious traditions and beliefs, draw on religious leaders who can provide presence or guidance, or find solace in their religious communities. Others do not have a religious or spiritual belief but find their comfort and connection through expressing grief in different ways. For instance, one mother in the group shared that at times finding a feeling of connection amidst the pain has been difficult. Often her impulse has been to protect those around her (such as her daughter) by not crying or openly grieving. However a therapeutic relationship with her psychologist has been of great comfort in allowing her to express her feelings and accept the grief. Others in the group related to the feeling of wanting to protect other loved ones from your grief, but it was widely acknowledged that actively expressing one's grief can be a way of keeping the voice of your child alive, through memories and connection.

THANKS TO ALL THE PARENTS

WHO ONCE AGAIN SHARED THEIR THOUGHTS,

MEMORIES AND EXPERIENCES WITH EACH OTHER

SO GENEROUSLY ON THIS EVENING.

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**

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

Thursday 15th June 2023
7.30pm—9.00pm
The RCH Foundation Resource Centre
Level 2, 48 Flemington Road
Parkville, VIC 3052

Please join us to discuss the topic:

'Managing relationships with the other children in your life'

If you wish to attend this group please
email: **Bereavement.Services@rch.org.au**

The newsletter is always a team effort.
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Social Work Department, RCH