

FAMILY BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Social Work Department

NEWSLETTER MAY 2019



Welcome to the May 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.

"The public and private me-coexisting with contradiction"

Thirteen parents attended this group session and, following introductions of themselves and sharing some words about their child, participants approached the topic in many ways, offering ideas, sharing similarities and differences in their experiences, and other times simply offering acknowledgement of what another parent is going through. The topic for the night triggered a number of thoughts and reflections.

The timing of the group was soon after Mothers' Day and many in the group had found it extremely tricky. Such days can be a challenge even after many years and there was some discussion around anniversaries more broadly, some stating it was hard to think ahead and imagine how these times would be navigated in the future.

One mother wondered: "**How can I make it to ten years?**" This led into the topic discussion about public and private selves and how parents manage to carry, express and look after themselves and their grief both in public settings and with unfamiliar people, but also with those close to them, with family, friends and on their own in their day to day lives.

"The public is a challenge, some days, some weeks", said one participant. **"I'm tired of putting on that 'that's ok' mask"**. Parents spoke a lot about the idea of a **"public versus private you"**, and it was acknowledged by the facilitator that there is a tension between very different "yous" which are often at odds but nevertheless all very real.



One parent stated that the whole topic made her angry. Another said “**You can’t win either way**”, and many in the room agreed with this. “**People expect you to be a mess all the time, and if you’re not they wonder why**”. Friends’ and families’ desire for bereaved parents to show consistency in how they are travelling in their grief, can be oppressive and doesn’t acknowledge the reality, as we have discussed in previous group sessions, that there can be good days and bad days and grief is not linear – a focus on life and restoration can be closely followed by feeling an overwhelming sense of loss and grief, and vice versa. One parent stated “**at times you feel you’re still progressing then all of a sudden there’s a huge regression**” - but many non-bereaved friends and family members seem unable to understand this non-linear aspect of grief.

One mother noted “**People look at me differently. I’m still the same person, just with something missing**”, and this experience of being treated as if she’s an entirely different person, makes her angry. Another responded to this that “**it’s not so much that you’re changing, it’s just**

that you have a range of feelings”.

Some participants expressed that they feel they have to “**put a face on**” around family, and this led to a discussion about what kind of people they choose to surround themselves with, both publicly and privately. One father talked about how he and his partner have made a conscious choice about whom they spend their time with. They “**moved away and changed our lives; it’s how our family survives, recovers and how we live our lives, moving away from toxic people**”. He stated that now they feel blessed to have a community that understands them: “**No more masks, this is just who we are**”. Another said “**people sometimes think we are ‘better’, like it’s a disease - we’ve slowly purged those people from our lives**”.

Sometimes the responses of others to grief, both publicly and privately, is to tell grieving parents they should focus on or appreciate their other child, as if this could somehow replace the child they have lost. This is extremely painful for the griever. For instance one mother who found Mothers’ Day very hard this year, was told by a school staff member that she should “**celebrate with the one you’ve got**”. Another was told “**you’re**



lucky that you've got another one". These kind of hurtful comments can come from both those close to you (the "private" sphere) and also from strangers ("public" sphere).

The notion of "public versus private" also led to an exploration of "seen versus unseen" (this writer's words). One parent described it as **"you can't see the duck's legs paddling under water while the duck is smooth and gliding on top – that's me."** Another said **"I think of it as cleaning the house by shoving everything in a cupboard"**. One father described **"carrying a backpack of grief which is really hard to do"**. Memories, which by their nature are unseen by others, can also be very hard - one parent described remembering the period leading up to their son's death: **"How hard it was to watch him get sicker and sicker. Some days I couldn't even look at him because it was so sad".**

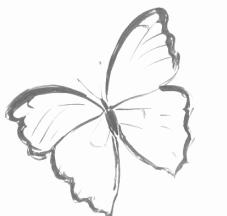
There was a lot of courageous reflection in this group on the impact of grief on day to day parenting of another child. **"Grief being so overwhelming, makes**



parenting so hard". One parent described how she never could have imagined how it would impact every aspect of her life, and particularly how she never foresaw how it would impact on how she parents the next child (who is four years old now). Another mother described how "the grief I've experienced, impacts every aspect - relationships, friends, absolutely everything. I thought (her daughter's) death would make me a better parent but it's made me worse and it horrifies me". She confided how it has problematized her relationship with her surviving child, and how this is a relationship which she really struggles with, despite how much she cares about her son. These painful mixed feelings make her despair of life at times, however despite this she is committed to being there for him: **"I would never leave him even though some days it would be much easier to leave".**

The facilitator wondered with her whether she at times assumes the worst of herself after everything she has been through. She agreed that she is her "worst judge". Weaving in the public/private topic, this mother

talked about how she hates it when people say "**I wish I could parent like you**", as her son's behaviour is "entirely different in public", in contrast to at home, in the private sphere. She commented "**he's conditioned to be polite in public and different at home**". This is a common experience with all children to some extent, but at times it's hard for a bereaved parent not to blame themselves or their child for this discrepancy. Many parents in the group thought their parenting is worse following the loss of a child. One stated "**I don't know what sort of parent I was before being a grieving parent...**" All parents (bereaved or not) struggle with the encounter with their own limits in parenting and how the way they parent doesn't always meet their ideal of parenting, but for many in the group these limitations were attributed to their experience of loss. One mother described her friend's response to this:



"A friend told me '**your child is an angel now but you're not an angel and you don't need to be an angel parent**'. Another parent commented "**we are our biggest judgement around parenting. Others aren't judging us, though we think they are maybe**".

However, despite this parents described there are aspects of grief

which do impact on their parenting in both public and private spheres. One mother confided that she feels "**resentment towards her other child for challenging behaviours that "get in the way of my grieving"**", and struggles with guilt about this. Others described the experience of grief as making them hypervigilant about safety: "**You start to helicopter and take the fun away from parenting – constantly saying to 'be careful'**". One mother stated "**the fear that something will happen to your children is there every minute of every day**", and another responded: "**that fear would not be so front of mind had we not been on the journey we're been on**". One parent described this as less a "**public/private**" dichotomy and more one of "control/loss of control", and that grief totally changes the way you think. This even affects subsequent pregnancy and how antenatal advice is interpreted, particularly when statistics about minimal risk etc are quoted to expectant parents. "**[Before losing my child] I was logical and trusted in statistics to calm my nerves**". But since then, as most parents in the group agreed, "**anyone can be that (unlucky) one**", and once you've experienced it once, there is no comfort in statistics.

Overall, group participants acknowledged that ongoing parenting is affected a lot by the death of a child and it hugely changes your perspective as a parent, despite the fact that "it's hard to differentiate between what's grief and what's other stuff". Parenting gets laden with multiple meanings, often weighty meanings: "**Things get so heavy with meaning around parenting**". "**You triple analyse yourself. Trying to see things just as what they are and not triple analysing, is what I'm aiming for**".

One parent stated "**I feel my grief is quite compartmentalised with thoughts of (child who died) popping in - but I'm focused on (living) child**". Another mother, whose child who died was one in a twin ship, expressed that "there's a time for being with the twin brother, and a time for grieving his lost brother" (at these times she spends time apart from the living twin, crying with her partner). At other times though, as another parent expressed, grief can "intrude itself" when you are with your living child: "I'll be doing something (with living child) and it comes along.." Another stated "**I don't want him to look back at his childhood and say I had a really crappy childhood because my sister died**" and many in the group who have

other children expressed agreement with this concern.

One mother, struggling with her son's difficult behaviours, tries to remind herself to "appreciate this. That guilt comes in that tells you to appreciate the bad behaviour because you miss it in the other (child who died)." She talked about the feeling of guilt at feeling sometimes that she loves her daughter who died, more than her son. Others commented that children who died "**go on a pedestal**" and there was much agreement with this in the group. The facilitator acknowledged how hard it is that when a child becomes an "angel", it's as if they would have somehow been angelic if still alive, yet of course they wouldn't be, as no child is.

Many parents also expressed feelings of guilt about how they had parented their child who died, wishing they had appreciated the brief time they had them more.

Group participants discussed how grief affects the way you think and respond to things both publicly and privately – it affects the whole way you view the world. You "meet a whole new world of people", "learning so many more children die than you realised before". One parent commented "**I didn't even know this world exists**".

Yet one parent remarked that they wouldn't want to take their grief

away to take away the experience they had of their child - and there was strong agreement across the room about this. **"We were lucky to have him, he showed us so much in nine weeks - a love we didn't know possible"**, said one parent. **"We are trying to be happy for him now"**, another stated. **"I'm a better person for him being in our life. The grief is still there. But we (my partner and I) chose to live in gratitude and light. I can't change the event but can change the story, the way we live our life. I want to move forward to love and light"** (even through days which are an "absolute mess"). Some parents commented that, despite indescribable pain they had grown and matured significantly as a result of their child's death. One stated **"In the growth I keep reminding myself to try again tomorrow if I'm having a bad day".**

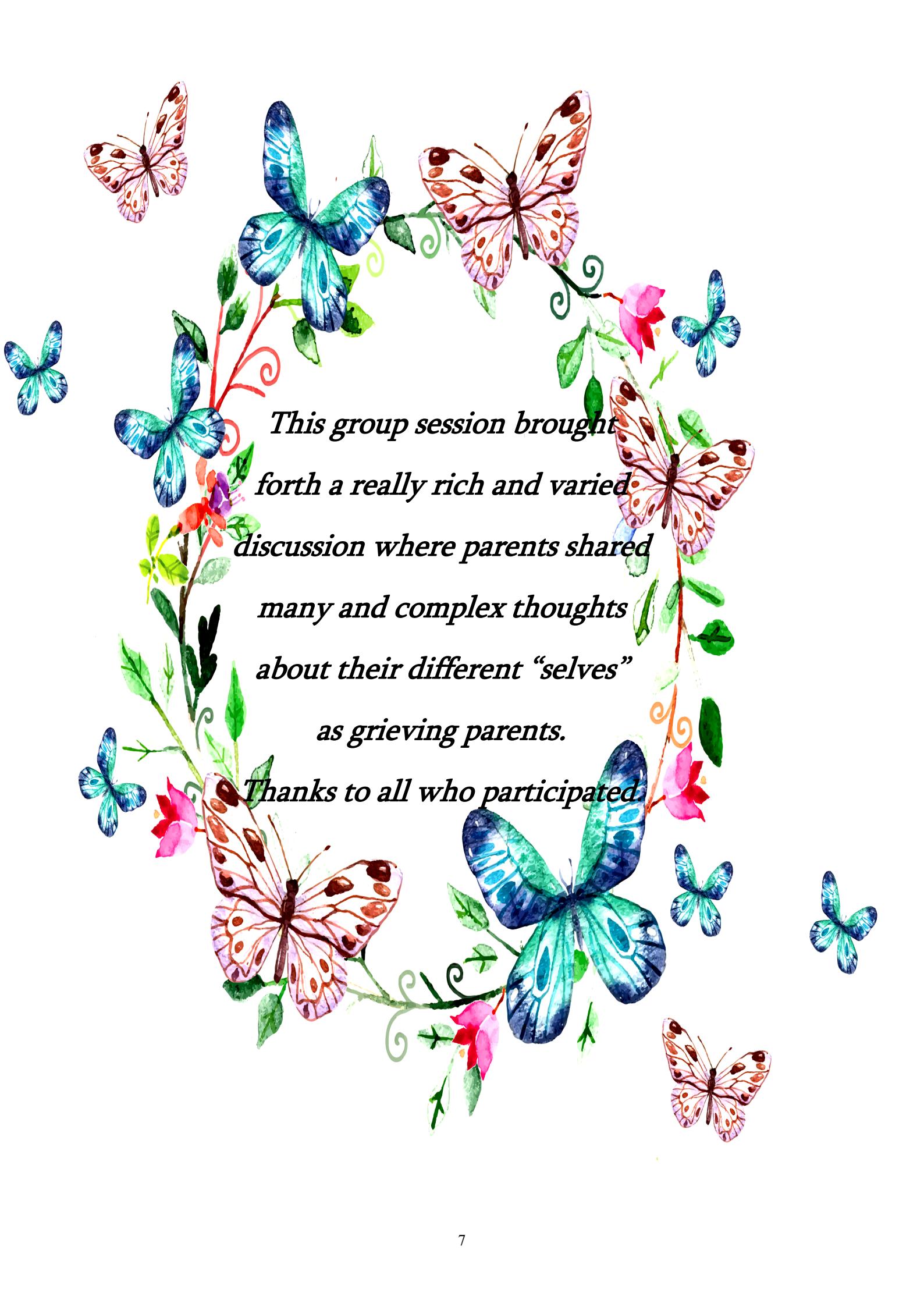
The importance of "conversation" was discussed in its **various aspects public and private**. **"Maybe we wouldn't have to put the 'face' on if people could have the conversation"**, one parent said. Another responded **"people are so uncomfortable"**.

Another observed **"Death is all part of the life cycle. We**

shouldn't be made to feel uncomfortable talking about our child's death".

Group members talked about the difficulty of responding to casual enquiries with strangers about children, for instance when asked about how many children they have, the different ways that parents acknowledge they have another child. Most find a way of counting their child, acknowledging them and the fact they have died, but occasionally, depending on the environment and who the questioner is, some parents avoid or gloss over it -though some said often their surviving children will confidently correct the impression by alluding to their sibling who died. One mother stated that she feels similarly to these kids who bring their sibling in to the conversation: **"Maybe I'm the kid that wants to tell everyone. I don't have other children and I want people to know I'm a mum".**





*This group session brought
forth a really rich and varied
discussion where parents shared
many and complex thoughts
about their different “selves”
as grieving parents.*

Thanks to all who participated.

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 20th June 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:

“Thinking about feeling – how do we process intense emotions?”

Please join us in June

*The newsletter is always a team effort.
Thank you to Robyn Clark for facilitating, guiding the group discussion and writing the newsletter and to Alice Throp 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.*

