The Grieving Consumer

Back to Basics August 2018

Community and Oral Health Directorate

*Consumer Feedback, Compliments and Complaints procedure*
Learning outcomes

- Describe five things you need to know about grief and loss
- Identify some common myths around grief and loss
- Discuss how our own experiences around grief and loss can impact on our reactions
- List five practical strategies on how to help someone who is grieving
The Five Things You Need to Know About Grief & Loss

• We all have a story of loss
• Loss is normal and grief is natural
• Loss has many faces; we need to learn to recognise all of them
• Everyone’s experience of grief will be as unique as they are
• People can and do heal from loss; but, like all healing, it is a journey that takes time
• Loss often feels like you are powerless and out of control
What loss isn’t – addressing myths

• Myth: Grief has a universal structure and timeline
• Myth: It is important to get over grief as soon as possible and move on with your life
• Myth: The more you cry, the more you are grieving what you have lost
• Myth: You just need to be strong and you will be fine
Why is this difficult – our own journey and reflections?

- Feeling incompetent in communication skills
- Wanting to shield the person from distress
- Feeling awkward about showing sympathy as a professional
- Being powerless, feeling embarrassed
- Being reminded of human vulnerability
- Working with loss can heighten your own feared losses or anxiety about our own death
- Feeling intensely uncomfortable with the emotion and the pain of the bereaved to the point of feeling helpless
“Only when we are comfortable grieving our own losses and confronting our closeness and distance from potential loss can we help”
Reflection on grief

How comfortable am I when others display grief or intense emotion such as anger or despair?

What losses may trigger memories of my own losses?

How do I feel when I hear descriptions of trauma or violence?

How do client’s losses remind you of losses you have experienced and if they do, how do you deal with these feelings?

Have you had recent personal experience with loss and how are you processing this grief?

What is my attitude to the thought of death or illness or disability?
Practical strategies

• Don’t be afraid to use the name of the person who has died. Many people get comfort from hearing the name of someone they love.

• One of the greatest gifts you can give someone who is grieving is time and the ability to listen. Be prepared to listen and to hear their story in a non-judgemental and accepting way.

• Let genuine empathy, concern and caring show and remain respectful at all times.

• Speak in calm and soothing tones.

• Be patient - people who are grieving will not necessarily know themselves what will be the most helpful.

• Ask yourself - how would you like to be treated?
Supporting someone who has experienced a loss

- View the loss from the bereaved person’s unique perspective
- Do not let your own sense of helplessness restrain you from reaching out to the bereaved
- Do not attempt to understand the loss in religious or philosophical terms
- Do not suggest that the bereaved feel better because there are other loved ones still alive
- Do not attempt to minimize the situation
- Be guided by the person re information - supply what they request
- Constantly check that the person has understood what you have said
- Be comfortable with silence and reflection - demonstrates understanding
An emotional rollercoaster

• Be aware of your reactions to criticism and hostility; your prejudices, values and beliefs; your reactions to success/failure; and your need to be in control of a situation

• Not saying ‘I know’ or ‘I understand’ unless you really do - do not assume

• Avoid platitudes – ‘It’s God’s will’, ‘They had a good innings’, 'Think of all the good times', 'You can always have another child’, ‘Look on the bright side’, ‘Be grateful for the time together’

• Avoid using euphemisms such as 'lost' or 'passed on'. Using direct and clear language helps to understand the reality of what has happened

• Do not take their responses personally – grief is an emotional rollercoaster and the reactions of the bereaved are not a personal attack on you
What can you do?

- Think of what might be needed, what you can offer and what constraints will affect your ability to follow through. You can then say, 'Here's what I'd like to do, if it would be helpful'
- Never tell the person to hide their grief, stop feeling their grief, or that it is time to 'get back to normal'
- Always follow through on what you say you will do, giving those who are grief-stricken the highest priority
- Do not fail to hold out the expectation that the bereaved ultimately will successfully accommodate the loss and that the pain will subside at some point
- Be informed about supports in the community or who in your organisation you can refer to for advice, guidance or support for the bereaved person
- A deceased’s property is very important
- Encouraging them to make their own decisions
Self-care

- Do what is good self-care for you – take time out and debrief, ask for help, eat chocolate, exercise, hug your loved ones, dance
- Access avenues of support (Line Manager, Employee Assistance Scheme and peers)
Things to remember

- Grief does not follow a linear pattern. It is more like a roller coaster, two steps forward and one step back.
- Grief is a personal experience that is hard to share, but a privilege to hear and be told.
- Everyone grieves in their own way, and so long as there is no risk or harm to them or anyone else, there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to grieve.
- It is important to remember that grief is a process, not an event.
- Profound grief is not something that we just ‘get over’, but rather is something that we gradually learn to live around as we continue to lead our lives.
- Grief can make people very sensitive and they may react or respond in unexpected ways.
- Grief can be likened to having an open wound, and it can be easy for others to inadvertently ‘touch a nerve’ or say or do the wrong thing.
- There is no formula for what is right or wrong - What one person finds helpful, another person may not.
Death

• Death can be a difficult subject and it can be hard to know what to do or say to someone who is grieving
• If you feel you have made a mistake and perhaps said the wrong thing, it is never too late to say you are sorry
Never underestimate the power of listening. Listening and sharing someone else’s pain can be personally demanding and exhausting. Make sure you have good support yourself and that you are not inhibiting your own capacity to grieve, whether it be for the person who has died, or for your own experiences of loss that may come back to the surface.

You need to be fair and kind to yourself, as well as the person who needs support, so be careful not to overcommit yourself and know your limits.
Remember

- Don’t need to be perfect
- You cannot ‘fix’ things for them, but there are ways that you can help
- Both religious and cultural factors may impact upon a person’s feelings
- Be mindful of bureaucracy

"Everyone can master grief but he that has it."

-Shakespeare
Resources

• Consumer Feedback, Compliments and Complaints procedure, accessed on
• http://www.pcc4u.org/ Palliative Care Curriculum for Undergraduates website homepage
• CareSearch Palliative Care Research Network,
• Program of Experience in the Palliative Approach,
  https://pepaeducation.com/support-and-education/