

The Role of Skilled Compassionate Touch in Grief Support

The experience of a bereavement massage therapy program in a community-based specialist palliative care service

ACGB Conference, Sydney, 2018

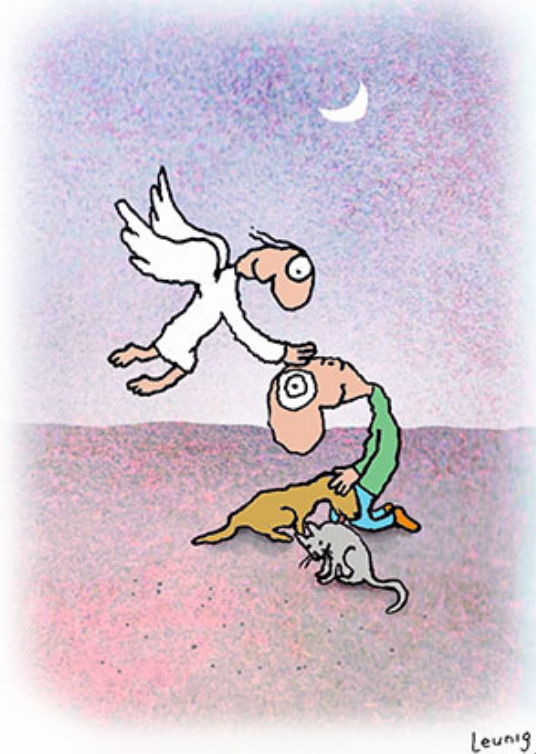
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In this presentation:

- The remarkable sense of touch
- Massage Therapy in the context of grief, loss and bereavement
- The Bereavement Massage Therapy Program at EPC



Pat the dog , pat the cat
Pat each other just like that.
When you fail , when I fall
We don't have to speak at all
Just reach out and touch this hand.
Who could ever understand ?
Touch my arm , stroke my head
There is little to be said.
Pat the dog , pat the cat
Pat me softly just like that.



“To touch is to give life” Michelangelo

“Touch is the first language and the last” Margaret Atwood

“Affective touch: the Higgs-Boson of the social brain” Francis McGlone

Not only does the remarkable sense of human touch enable moment to moment survival adaptations to the external environment, but it also acts as a conduit for social connectivity, attachment and an embodied sense of self.



CT-Afferent system mediating *affective* rather than *discriminative* touch

- Low-conducting, unmyelinated, peripheral nerve fibres, slow velocities of stroke
- Acts as a cutaneous mediator of oxytocin release and pain modulation
- Activates insular cortical areas of the brain associated with emotional regulation and social connection

“The Relaxation Response: a physical state of deep rest which changes the physical and emotional responses to stress.....the opposite of the flight, fight, freeze response.”

Herbert Benson



I may look as if I am doing nothing at all, but at the neuro-endocrine level, I am very busy indeed

Instead of cortisol, adrenaline and norepinephrine, there flows oxytocin and serotonin

“Grief is a physiological phenomenon” Eric Lindemann

- Pain
- Muscle discomfort
- Headache
- Insomnia
- Gut dysregulation
- Immune suppression
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Appetite loss

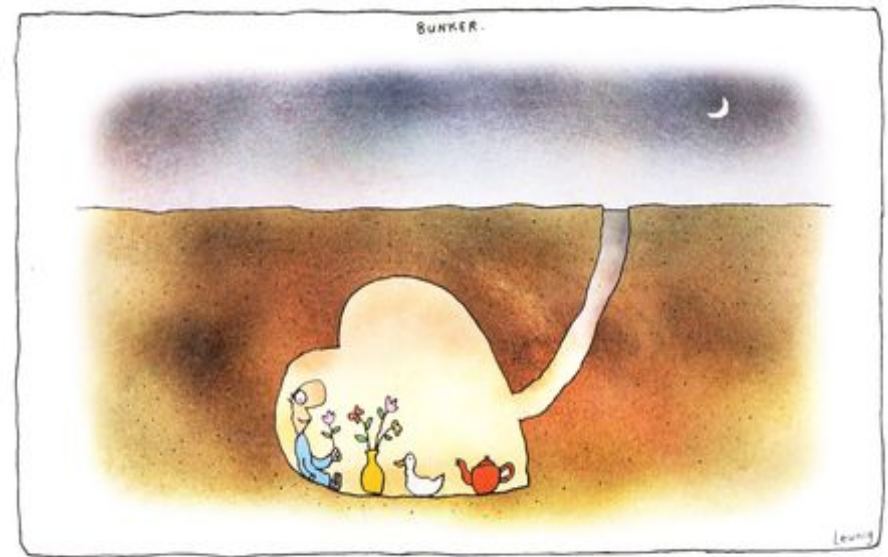


- Anxiety
- Flat mood
- Distress
- Confusion
- Social isolation
- Emotional exhaustion
- Agitation

“To ignore the somatic aspects of grief in favour of psychological ones is to incompletely address the needs of the griever” Dr Therese A Rando

Goals of care: offering a somatic doorway

- Ameliorate pain or discomfort
- Enhance sense of physical well-being
- Facilitate the Relaxation Response
- Validate feelings and thoughts
- Welcome emotional expression
- “Hold space” for reflection
- Provide somatic education
- Support coping strategies
- Promote self-agency
- Foster the building of resources
- Monitor for referable indicators



Safe Haven

“A person’s beliefs and feelings manifest in their body and, conversely, changes in the body can and do facilitate changes in belief and feeling”. (Totton, 2003 in Reisen, 2013)

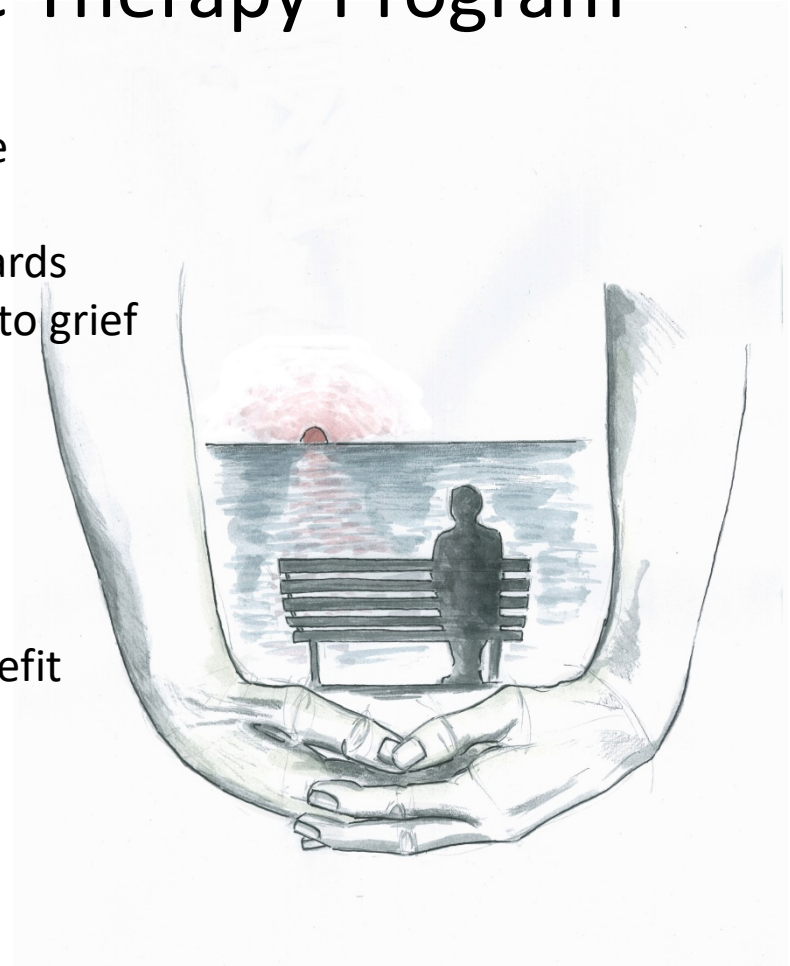
Reflecting models of grief, loss and bereavement

Orientation of massage therapy in this setting is consistent with elements of the Dual Process Model of Grief, Attachment Theory (as it relates to grief) and, in “meeting the person where they are”, is sensitive to styles of grieving.

- Creates an environment of refuge and safe haven
- Enables embodied feelings of loss to be felt
- Allows space and time for a “breather” from the tasks of grieving
- “Normalises” emotions and physical responses
- Promotes coping and adjustment strategies
- Provides affective touch as a mediator of social connection and sense of self
- Encourages a focus on physical and emotional self-care as restorative practice

EPC Bereavement Massage Therapy Program

- Reflects interdisciplinary approach to care
- Complements bereavement program
- Responds to bereavement support standards
- Recognises holistic mind-body responses to grief
- Ensures continuity of care
- Self or bereavement discipline referral
- Provided in dedicated environment
- Bereavement educated therapists
- Available for 13 months post death
- Multiple sessions based on need and benefit
- Free service
- Evaluation?



The proposition: that compassionate touch provided by skilled massage therapists delivers both solace and self-care resources, a contribution which may serve to strengthen the contemporary approach to bereavement support.



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