

**Bereavement Support Booklet  
for Residential Aged Care Staff**



This booklet has been compiled to assist residential aged care staff to better understand the experience, risks and impacts associated with loss and grief in the workplace. Self-care strategies for maintaining physical and emotional well-being are outlined and suggestions are made about how to create a positive workplace environment to support staff in managing loss and grief.

## **Bereavement Support Booklet for Residential Aged Care Staff**



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### **Enquiries**

All enquiries about this booklet should be directed to:  
Brisbane South Palliative Care Collaborative  
Email: [bspcc@health.qld.gov.au](mailto:bspcc@health.qld.gov.au)

An electronic copy of this booklet can be downloaded at:  
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### **Disclaimer**

The information provided by the author in this document is correct at the time of printing and is provided as general information only. In utilising general information about strategies to address loss and grief experienced by staff, specific issues relevant to your workplace should always be considered. This document does not constitute professional advice and should not be relied on as such. No information in this document is intended as medical advice. It should not be used to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease, nor should it be used for therapeutic purposes or as a substitute for an appropriate health professional's advice.

## Working in Residential Aged Care

The opportunity to form long-term and close relationships with residents and their families is a deeply satisfying and valued aspect of working in residential aged care. Many view these relationships as a key reason to remain in the aged care workforce. It's not surprising therefore that staff may experience a deep sense of loss when a resident dies and may even at times feel overwhelmed by the accumulative losses involved in caring for dying residents over time.<sup>1-4</sup>

Working as a member of a care team in residential aged care has enormous rewards – in caring for residents, adding to the quality of their lives, sharing their pasts, and being a valuable part of their present.<sup>4</sup>



## Understanding Loss, Grief and Bereavement

Close and deeply valued relationships often develop between staff and residents. It's important to be aware that when a resident dies, you may experience grief associated with that loss.

**Loss** is the severing or breaking of an attachment to someone or something, resulting in a changed relationship.<sup>5</sup>

**Grief** is the normal response to loss. It may involve a range of reactions: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Responses to grief sometimes include unhappiness, anger, guilt, pain and longing for the lost person or thing. Feelings of numbness, emptiness, relief and isolation may also be related to grief.<sup>5</sup>

**Bereavement** is the total reaction to a loss and includes the process of healing or 'recovery' from the loss. We all grieve and recover in our own way.<sup>5</sup>

*Grief is the normal response to loss.  
We all grieve and recover in our own way.*

## Recognising Risk Factors Related to Loss and Grief at Work

In aged care, some factors that may influence your experience of loss and grief at work include:

- Length and closeness of your relationship with the person who died.
- Nature and quality of the person's death.
- Lack of knowledge and confidence about how to deliver high quality end of life care.
- Lack of knowledge and confidence about how to discuss death and dying.
- Lack of a supportive work environment.
- Other work-related factors – e.g. workload and time pressures.
- Previous difficult bereavement experiences and accumulative grief.
- Stress and other challenges in your personal life.<sup>4-6</sup>

Each risk factor does not affect everyone in the same way or to the same degree. Your response to each risk factor may vary across situations and over time.

## Common Physical and Emotional Reactions to Loss and Grief

Experiencing loss and grief as a result of the death of a resident can take staff by surprise and may leave them feeling bewildered and confused. It may even lead some to question the quality of their professional skills and ability to function effectively in their role.<sup>4,5</sup>

Physical and emotional reactions to loss and grief may include:

- Feelings of helplessness, confusion, sadness, anger, anxiety, apathy and stress.
- Difficulty concentrating on tasks or interacting with others.
- Withdrawing from relationships at work or in your personal life.
- Avoiding social activities.
- Lack of motivation to do things that you usually enjoy.
- Not eating or sleeping properly.
- Physical and mental exhaustion.
- A sense of not being 'in control' of your own thoughts, feelings or behaviour.
- Loss of confidence in your ability to function well at work or in your personal life.
- Physical illness.
- Challenges to your religious or spiritual beliefs.<sup>4-7</sup>

Reactions to loss and grief are different for everyone and there are no set timelines for 'recovery'. Grief is the normal response to loss.

## Strategies for Managing Loss and Grief

Residential aged care staff are very skilled at taking care of the physical and psychosocial needs of residents and residents' families. However, in the day-to-day busy routine of an aged care facility, staff may forget to take care of themselves and each other.

### **Pat's Story**

Pat has been a careworker at the same facility for 15 years. Over that time, she has seen many residents and staff come and go. Pat's kids have grown up and her last child has just left home. Pat's friend and co-worker Jenny has recently retired. It seems like every day the workload increases but no extra staff are put on to help. Over a couple of weeks, three long-term residents died including a lovely lady called Gloria. In the days before Gloria's death, Pat found herself avoiding Gloria's daughters and hoping not to be on duty when Gloria died.

Pat's experience of workload pressure, loss of close working relationships, and wanting to avoid potentially distressing conversations with the family and friends of dying residents is not uncommon in aged care. Let's look at some self-care strategies that may help in managing these and similar situations.



## Self-Care:

Developing self-awareness is an important step in self-care. It assists you to identify your strengths and weaknesses as well as to understand why you react the way you do in certain situations. Being self-aware can assist you to manage your emotions rather than being overwhelmed by them.

Develop your self-awareness by reflecting on how you respond in stressful situations and why you respond this way. Questions to consider in relation to your work include:

- Physical: What is happening to my state of health and well-being?
- Emotional: How do I feel during and after I finish work?
- Perceptions: How do I make sense of my experiences at work?
- Activities: How well do I balance my work and personal life?
- Relationships: How has work impacted on my relationships (family, friends)?
- Expertise: What am I learning in my work role?
- Spiritual: How have my faith and personal meanings changed?<sup>6,8</sup>

Along with increasing your self-awareness, other self-care strategies that will assist you in responding effectively to grief include:

- Acknowledge your grief and recognise that it is a normal reaction to the experience of loss.
- Talk to your supervisor and colleagues about what you are experiencing and request their help.
- Seek support from a professional counsellor.
- Develop self-care strategies that promote your physical and emotional well-being – e.g. healthy diet, regular exercise, find activities that help you to relax and make time to do them.
- Have fun with your family and friends.
- Think positively and be proactive in raising and addressing concerns.<sup>4-8</sup>



### **Lilly's Story**

Lilly, a recently graduated registered nurse, became very fond of Jean who reminded her of her own grandmother. Even when she wasn't caring for Jean, she would try to find a minute or so in her day to say hello. Lilly noticed that Jean was becoming frailer and was no longer getting out of bed. One day when Lilly returned from having a few days off, Jean's bed was empty. Jean had been sent to hospital where she died a couple of days later. Lilly wasn't expecting that Jean would die and she didn't get the chance to say goodbye. Over the coming days Lilly experienced moments of intense sadness. Lilly questioned whether she had the fortitude to continue working in a caring role and considered resigning from her job.

Staff may experience a deep sense of loss when a resident dies and might at times even doubt that they can continue to work in aged care. Let's look at some ways in which workplaces can support staff in managing loss and grief associated with the death of residents.

## Supporting Colleagues:

Staff may have developed effective ways to deal with loss and grief that can be shared (formally and informally) with their colleagues. Residential aged care staff can support each other by:

- Recognising and acknowledging the loss and grief that a colleague may be experiencing.
- Encouraging colleagues to share their concerns and feelings following the death of a resident.
- Listening and responding in a 'non-judgemental' way to colleagues' experiences and needs.<sup>4</sup>

## Creating a Positive Workplace Environment:

Participate in creating and maintaining a workplace culture that recognises and actively supports staff experiencing grief. For example:

- Recognise the loss of each resident when they die – e.g. by placing a photograph of the resident or flowers in an appropriate place at your facility, by contributing to a ‘memory book’ dedicated to the resident.
- Support the attendance of staff at the funeral/memorial service for the deceased resident (subject to permission from the family).
- Ensure that there are procedures in place to inform off duty staff that a resident they have been caring for has died.
- Provide formal and informal opportunities for staff to debrief following the death of a resident – e.g. encourage staff to share their personal stories and memories about caring for the resident.
- At staff meetings, promote open discussion, reflection and the sharing of information about clinical practice and related matters.
- Participate in staff education and training related to death and dying. Increased awareness about what to expect and how to communicate may reduce concerns and fears about caring for dying residents.<sup>4-8</sup>

## References

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- <sup>7</sup> Tan HM, O'Connor MM, Howard T, Workman B & O'Connor D (2013) Responding to the death of a resident in aged care facilities: Perspectives of staff and residents. *Geriatric Nursing*, 34, 41-46.
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**Residential Aged Care  
Palliative Approach Toolkit**