



Taking Care of Yourself Matters: An Introduction to Self-Care for Careworkers in Residential Aged Care

Hi, I'm Gina. I've worked as a careworker in residential aged care for about twelve years and really enjoy my work. Caring for residents and supporting their families is very rewarding. I get to help improve the quality of their lives, hear their stories about the past and try to be a valuable part of each day for them. I know other staff feel that way too.

It's not surprising then that when a resident dies, we can experience a sense of loss, sometimes very deeply. And, if you've been caring for several dying residents at once, feelings of loss can add up – and may, at times, feel overwhelming. It's important to know that as a resident is dying, and after they pass away, you may experience grief due to that loss.

In this short video, I'm going to:

- talk to you about some situations in residential aged care that may put staff at greater risk of experiencing grief, and
- give you some practical tips about self-care and building a supportive workplace that can help you and your co-workers better manage experiences of loss and grief.

Sometimes the feelings staff experience due to the death of a resident can take them by surprise and leave them feeling confused and unsure. You might even start doubting your skills and ability to do your job. Let's take a look at an example.

Pat has been a careworker here for many years and has always enjoyed her job. She's a single mum with three children aged ten to sixteen, all living at home with her. Pat was the main carer for her father before he died six months ago. She misses him very much – his sense of humour and advice often helped her to keep things in perspective when she felt stressed or sad. However, in the last few months, Pat's started to feel stressed at work and unsure about whether she wants to keep being a careworker.

Her close friend and co-worker Jenny retired a month ago. Since then it seems to Pat like every day the workload increases – and caring for dying residents and their families has become particularly hard for her. Before Jenny retired, Pat would often chat with her about residents they were looking after together and how to provide really good care.

Pat feels so tired when she gets home after work that she doesn't catch up with friends anymore, and her kids have started to say that she's got a really 'short fuse' and gets angry much more than usual.

Over the last couple of weeks, three long-term residents have died including a lady called Betty. Pat really liked Betty - her kind manner, her stories about growing up in the outback, her cooking tips. Even when she wasn't looking after Betty, Pat would try to find a minute or so in her day to pop in and say hello. But in the few days before Betty's death, Pat found herself avoiding Betty's daughter and hoping not to be on duty when Betty died.

Pat feels that skipping her usual tea break with co-workers is the only way to get on top of her workload. Her co-workers have noticed that she hasn't been her usual 'positive and patient self' for the last few months and worry that she's pushing herself too much.

Pat's experience of workload pressures, loss of close working relationships, and wanting to avoid potentially distressing conversations with the families and friends of dying residents is not uncommon, particularly when life outside of work is also busy or difficult.

Some things that might lead you to experience loss and grief at work include:

- how long you've known the resident and how close you felt to them. Someone you've known for a long time or were close to can make it more likely that you'll experience grief following their death
- if the death was unexpected or you felt that there was nothing you could do to help
- being worried that you don't have enough knowledge or confidence to help with giving good end of life care, or talking about death and dying with residents and their families
- feeling that you shouldn't talk about a resident's death may add to your experience of grief
- it's also important to remember that any previous experiences you've had with grief and loss, either at work or in your personal life, may affect how you deal with things this time, and finally
- stress and challenges in your personal life can influence your reactions at work.

Remember – grief is very personal. It's experienced in different ways by different people. It doesn't look and feel the same for everyone, and the way you respond to a loss can change over time and in different situations.

Your workplace will have a system in place to help and support you. For example, this might include being able to talk with a counsellor through an employee assistance program.

Here are some examples of normal reactions to grief – you might've experienced some of them yourself:

- feeling sad, angry, anxious or stressed
- difficulty concentrating on tasks or conversations
- lack of motivation
- withdrawing from relationships at work or at home
- avoiding social activities that you used to enjoy
- not eating or sleeping properly
- physical or mental exhaustion
- loss of confidence in your skills and abilities.

Let's look at some practical ways to manage these reactions.

Pat (careworker): Hi Mei, can I join you?

Mei-Ling (careworker): Of course! What a busy day! You look tired Pat – are you feeling alright?

Pat: There just aren't enough hours in the day. I'm exhausted!

Mei-Ling: I've also kind of noticed that you haven't really been yourself lately. Would you like to talk about it?

Pat: I guess I would. I just... The last two weeks I just can't get on top of things either here or at home. You know me - hard worker and all - but I'm finding it really difficult to concentrate and get motivated to do anything. Betty's death last week was the 'last straw'. I'm just so sad that she died. I didn't expect to feel this bad – but I do. I guess I'm grieving for her. I keep trying to remind myself that what I'm feeling is normal – especially since I looked after her for almost two years and we'd grown close.

Acknowledge your grief and recognise that it's a normal response to loss.

Pat: Thanks for asking if I'm OK – it does help to talk about it.

Talk to your co-workers about how you're feeling.

Mei-Ling: Hey, we're a team remember – and it's important that we look after each other.

Mei-Ling: So, were you able to go to Betty's funeral?

Pat: Yes – I asked Betty's daughter if it was OK for me to attend. She seemed to really appreciate that I wanted to be there – and Meg gave me time off work to attend. It was a lovely send off – Betty would've loved all the flowers and the memories that people shared.

Ask the family's permission to attend the funeral.

Mei-Ling: It's so great that you got to go to the funeral – that would've meant so much to Betty.

Mei-Ling: I'm planning on going to see a movie on Sunday afternoon. Would you like to come with me? I could pick you up from your place and we could get some lunch before the movie if you like?

Pat: Yeah, I'd really enjoy that – thanks. I've made plans to go bike riding with my kids on Saturday, so between that and going for lunch and a movie with you on Sunday, this weekend's going to be really relaxing.

Have fun with your family and friends and develop self-care strategies that promote your physical, mental and emotional well-being. For example, eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get a good night's sleep, find activities that help you relax and that you enjoy, and make time to do them.

It's also important to play an active part in creating a workplace that supports staff when they experience grief. Recognise and acknowledge the loss and grief that your co-workers may be experiencing after the death of a resident – and offer to listen if they want to talk about it. As Mei said, 'it's important that we look after each other'.

Also, remember that your co-workers may deal with death and grief differently to you, particularly if they're from another culture. It's important to find out about and respect these differences.

The 'Residential Aged Care Palliative Approach Toolkit' – or PA Toolkit for short – includes useful resources for careworkers. In particular, the 'Bereavement Support Booklet for Residential Aged Care Staff' has detailed information about grief-related risk factors and reactions commonly experienced by residential aged care staff. It also has practical tips about self-care and workplace strategies to help staff manage their experiences of loss and grief following the death of residents.

You can access and download PA Toolkit resources at no cost from the website: www.caresearch.com.au/PAToolkit. Or, your facility should have received a Toolkit, so ask your manager about it.

Taking care of yourself and your co-workers helps to create a positive workplace which, in turn, helps to provide the best possible care and support for residents and their families.

This is a transcript of the Palliative Approach (PA) Toolkit video *Taking Care of Yourself Matters: An Introduction to Self-Care for Careworkers in Residential Aged Care*. To view the video visit www.caresearch.com.au/PAToolkit

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