

## **section 7.2: general guidelines for supporting bereaved people**

### **issues to consider prior to the patient's death**

- would a family meeting be of benefit? – these meetings provide an opportunity to ask questions, express fears, concerns, identify areas of conflict and provide opportunity for sharing of grief between family members
- are family members engaging in protective behaviour by not talking about the death?
- is the bereaved person(s) prepared for the patient's death?
- does the person want to be present at the time of death?
- does the person understand what they see happening to the patient? – are the physical signs of disease progression or dying recognised?
- is there unfinished business between the patient and the bereaved person?

### **practical approaches to providing support**

- demonstrate support and empathy by:
  - encouraging the person to tell their story
  - providing opportunities to explore the meaning of the loss for this person
- consider cultural influences – how does the person's culture influence their grief reaction?
- normalise and validate wide range of grief reactions/responses
- explore coping mechanisms
  - how has the person coped with previous loss(es)?
  - what was helpful? what was not helpful?
  - explore in detail the person's support system – its strengths and weaknesses
  - demonstrate respect for the person's coping style
- recognise the value of human connection through your presence
- identify risk factors (see below)

### **factors suggesting greater risk for complicated grief<sup>1</sup>**

#### **the person**

- own past history or family history of depression or psychiatric disorder
- cumulative experience of losses or other major stressors (past and present)
- intense distress or disordered behaviour

#### **mode of death**

- sudden, unexpected or traumatic death
- untimely death in the context of the life cycle, eg death of a child
- stigmatised or shocking, eg death due to a violent act or suicide

#### **relationship with the deceased**

- ambivalent, conflictual or abusive relationship
- overly dependent relationship
- family is dysfunctional or unsupportive

## **other factors**

- religious and spiritual beliefs of the bereaved
- different cultural responses to terminal illness, the dying process and the death
- the person's perceived level of family, interpersonal and community support

## **responsibility for making referrals**

If the risk factors already described are identified, contact the hospital social worker in public facilities (or discharge planner for private hospitals), who will assist in referral to community based supports or the local specialist palliative care service for assessment and counselling.

Additionally, should the bereaved person or other family member state that they have or are considering any means of self harm including suicide, or have information about a significant other person who has stated this intention to them, the medical staff of the primary treating team and the person's local doctor must be alerted and access to 24 hour contact numbers for Lifeline and local mental health services should be provided. The Living is for Everyone website also provides valuable practical information for families and staff using fact sheets (eg "Helping someone at risk of suicide") – see resources at the end of this section.

## **related resources and information**

**Alfred James Funeral Homes** – Bereavement Educational Services – ph 08 8371 1009

**Lifeline – 24 hour counselling service** – ph 13 11 14

**Blackwell Funerals** – Bereavement Educational Services – ph 08 8352 1577

**Coroner's Office Counselling & Support Service** – 08 8204 0600  
(2 social workers – free service)

**Good grief support groups** – [www.goodgrief.org.au](http://www.goodgrief.org.au), email [info@goodgrief.org.au](mailto:info@goodgrief.org.au), ph 02 8912 4844

**Grief Management Services** – ph 08 8277 4441 (fee paying)

### **Local minister of religion**

**The Loss and Grief Centre** – ph 08 8305 9670

Information, support and networking for people involved or interested in loss, grief, death and bereavement.

**Adelaide Solace** – ph 08 8272 4334 (7days)  
Support groups for widows and widowers.

**Vietnam Veterans Counselling Services** – ph 7422 4500  
country residents – 1800 011 046  
after hours counselling – 1800 011 046

**White Lady Funerals** – ph 08 8371 1040

## **access to support and counselling**

**Carers SA – National Caregivers Counselling Program** – ph 08 8271 6288  
pre and post bereavement support of caregivers

**Commonwealth Caregiver Resource Centre** – ph 1800 242 636  
can provide the contact names of local grief counsellors

**Listings of private counsellors and family therapists can be accessed via local council websites**

**Local Community Health Centres** may have access to clinicians with specific counselling skills  
**Relationships Australia (SA) Inc** – ph 08 8223 4566

## supports for parents following the loss of a child

**“Journeys – Palliative care for children and teenagers”** package, Palliative Care Australia – can be accessed from [www.pca.org.au](http://www.pca.org.au)

## grief and loss community supports for children and adolescents

**Canteen** – ph 08 8161 7488

Australian Organisation for Young People Living with Cancer

**Good grief support groups for aged 6-24** – [www.goodgrief.org.au](http://www.goodgrief.org.au), email; [info@goodgrief.org.au](mailto:info@goodgrief.org.au), ph 02 8912 4844

**Starbear** – ph 08 8305 9679

for children, aged 5–16, who have suffered the loss of a parent, sibling or caregiver

<http://www.anglicare-sa.org.au/services/starbear.html>

**The Compassionate Friends (SA)** – ph 08 8351 0344 (answering machine – leave message for further contact) for bereaved parents suffering the death of a child of any age

**Winston’s Wish** – [www.winstonswish.org.uk](http://www.winstonswish.org.uk)

## websites

**Beyond Blue** – the national depression initiative – [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Grieflink** - [www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

**The Living is for everyone (LIFE)** website has been developed by the Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health ([Auseinet](http://Auseinet)) as part of its commitment to facilitating networks for information exchange and learning under the Australian Government National Suicide Prevention Strategy (NSPS) -

[www.livingisforeveryone.com.au](http://www.livingisforeveryone.com.au)

## references

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Table 3 pg 44; Therapeutic Guidelines- Palliative Care, Version 2 (2005) Therapeutic Guidelines Ltd, Victoria, Australia.