

Grief and Loss – Dealing with Patient Death

As the number of COVID-19 cases rise across Australia, many individuals are reckoning with significant losses. This unfortunately is not something that is new to healthcare professionals. Whilst workers may expect themselves to be able to easily manage the events that result from medical experiences, the reality can be a little more complicated, particularly when it comes to patient death. Healthcare workers may find that their reactions are heightened at this time due to the cumulative experiences of stress/distress being felt within the healthcare system. It might be that individuals may find themselves reacting differently to how they would have in the past. This is not surprising and is a commonly shared experience. This resource provides some important information, strategies and support options which can be used in the face of these events.

What is Grief?

Grief is the natural reaction to a loss; it can influence the physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioural, and spiritual aspects of our lives. Healthcare workers may experience this personally, or they may be the support system for patients and their families going through grief and loss.

There is no “right way” to grieve, and no way of predicting how long the grieving period will or should last. Whilst grief is a normal response, emotional responses to the death of a patient can vary greatly. While some may experience very strong or mixed-feelings, others might feel a ‘numbness’ - bereft of all feeling. For some, feelings of loss are debilitating and do not improve even after time passes. This is known as complicated grief. The grief is chronic and has a significant impact on the affected person.

Understanding Common Reactions to Loss

Grief is an individual experience and people can respond to loss in a variety of ways. Below are some common reactions to grief, including that which might be experienced in response to a patient’s death:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt and remorse
- Shock
- Preoccupation with the loss
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleep disturbances
- Crying
- Restlessness
- Tiredness/reduced energy

Strategies to Help with Grief and Loss

People cope with grief related to patient death in a variety of ways; whilst some people might prefer to talk openly about their experience, others may prefer some alone time. Others may prefer to just ‘get on with the job’. Below are some tips to cope with grief:

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- Allow yourself time to grieve the loss of a patient – discuss options for support/time out with the appropriate person in your workplace
- Talk with others who share a similar experience (e.g., a colleague), but do not compare yourself to others and their responses to patient death
- Take care of your physical health (e.g., regular exercise, eat healthy, limit alcohol)
- Maintain normal sleep patterns or get plenty of rest even if you can't sleep
- Practice relaxation activities, such as mindfulness
- Participate in enjoyable activities/hobbies
- Ask for help if you need it

Remember, while many people will learn strategies that help them to adjust to patient loss with experience and time, some individuals may require additional assistance. If you would like to talk to someone further, you can contact the **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)** on **1800 099 044** or work@caraniche.com.au

Help is also available through:

- Your GP and community health centre, if needed.
- A mental health care specialist such as a Psychiatrist, Psychologist, Counsellor or Social Worker. This can often be Medicare funded
- GriefLine (1300 845 745)
- Lifeline (13 11 14), Beyond Blue (1300 224 636) or MensLine (1300 78 99 78)
- The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement (ACGB) (03 9265 2100 or www.grief.or)