

Tips for Nurses: Grief and Loss among Staff



What it is: Grief is a response to a loss and it can affect all parts of a person's life.

Bereavement is the period of grieving experienced by family and friends in response to the death of someone close to them.

Why it matters: Staff working in aged care look after many people who die. As a result, they may experience repeated grief.

Caring for others may provide job satisfaction. However grief over the death of people in your care is not unusual and may contribute to burnout and overwhelming stress. This should be acknowledged.

Sometimes it can lead to complicated or prolonged grief where grief is intense, debilitating and/or persistent. This should be reported. Meetings to debrief staff following a death may be appropriate. Organisations can help through supportive policies and allowing time to grieve.

What I need to know: Grief is a common response to bereavement and loss. People with palliative care needs are often dependent on their carers, and you may feel a strong sense of loss when they die. How people express grief varies. No one should tell another how they should grieve.

Talking to a GP, counsellor, or pastoral care worker may help aged care workers to acknowledge their grief and to grieve in a healthy way.

There are bereavement services to help you with grief and loss. Strategies including acknowledging the work of the team, memorials, and allowing staff to sign condolence cards to families can help.

Reducing burnout among aged care staff can improve morale and leads to better care.

Education in grief, loss, and bereavement for aged care workers can help them:

- manage their own grief and burnout
- with emotional and professional growth.

Actions

Instead of 'protecting yourself' from future loss by keeping a distance from clients, learn ways to cope with grief and develop self-care. You can grieve and still care well.

Education in cultural and spiritual differences in responding to death can also help staff to understand and cope with deaths and a range of family responses.

Talking to your supervisor and colleagues about what you are experiencing can help. If you need more support request their help to find this. Talking with a counsellor or pastoral care worker may help.

Taking care of your own physical and mental health can help you to cope with grief and bereavement and avoid burnout.

Healthy grieving may be beneficial to aged care staff. This may include:

- memorial rituals for clients or residents who have died
- the opportunity for staff to sign condolence cards to families
- annual memorial services
- following the protocols of your organisation.

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.

Tools

Visit the ELDAC Self-care room.

Name: _____

My reflections:

How could/do I support staff to cope with grief in the workplace?

Do I have an opportunity to be supported/mentored about grief?

My notes:

See related palliAGED Practice
Tip Sheets:
Grief and Loss among Older
People, Families and Residents
Self-care
Talking about Dying

For references and the latest version of all the Tip Sheets visit
www.palliaged.com.au/Practice-Centre/For-Nurses

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