

Age Old Problems: New Aged Care



A podcast by Helping Hand



Episode Eight

Understanding Grief & Bereavement



14 minutes

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Episode 8: Understanding Grief and Bereavement



Helping Hand

00:00:00 Kate

Welcome to *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*, a podcast by Helping Hand that offers information and advice to help you find and access the right aged care services. This podcast was recorded on Kauria land.

00:00:22 Kate

Hello and thank you for listening to *Age Old Problems: New Aged Care*. I'm your host, Kate Holland. In this episode, we're discussing grief and bereavement. What they are, some of the ways that people can respond to loss, and how you can support yourself or a loved one through the process. No one should ever feel alone. There are places that you can go to for help and people that you can speak to and at Helping Hand one of those people is Paul Hodgson, the Coordinating Chaplain. He joins me to share his wisdom on the topic. Welcome, Paul.

00:00:48 Paul

Thank you, Kate.

00:00:49 Kate

So can you start by telling us about your role at Helping Hand?

00:00:51 Paul

So as you said I am the Helping Hand Coordinating Chaplain. What that role entails is offering and providing support for residents in our residential care homes with regards to their social and emotional wellbeing and to, where appropriate, offering specifically spiritual care and support. And what that looks like is offering the opportunity for residents to talk about whatever is going on for them in their world at that moment. Whether that's something that's troubling them, or worrying them or they're experiencing anxiety, or it might be that they have had a fantastic weekend and want to talk about catching up with their family or some happy or joyous experience that they had.

00:01:38 Kate

So even though your title has the word 'chaplain', it's important that people can get support from you that doesn't have to be in the religious space.

00:01:46 Paul

Sometimes it is more spiritual, like the big questions of life and purpose and hope and that sort of thing. But no, that's right. It's around whatever the starting point for the person is, what's right in front of you? What's going on in your world? What are you reflecting on? What are your emotions right now? And sometimes simply to be heard, to have those emotions and feelings validated can make a huge difference to the sense of well being for that person.

00:02:12 Kate

So one of the conversations you must deal with a bit working in aged care is around grief and bereavement, and I believe these terms refer to two different things.

00:02:22 Paul

My understanding, or my own personal definition, would be the so that grief is the emotional, cognitive, and even physiological response to change. Even when change that we experience is positive, we still can have the grief response and incorporate those different aspects of who we are. Most often, we associate grief with the difficult and challenging emotions to do with loss and loss can come in so many different shapes and forms.

00:02:55 Paul

Bereavement is, in my understanding, probably in reference specifically to the sense of loss and grief and even the societal and cultural norms around the processes that we go through when someone close to us dies. So bereavement might be a, you know, a narrow, thin edge of a much bigger topic that grief is.

00:03:17 Kate

You mentioned physiological reactions. I found that quite interesting, looking into this idea of grief and bereavement. There are some quite common responses that people have when they're grieving and they're not all in the mind, are they?

00:03:29 Paul

Well, no, that's right. And grief isn't one emotion or one experience. So our brain will react and respond with different chemicals that give us physiological responses. So we literally feel it in our body, not just as an emotion or a feeling.

00:03:47 Kate

So when someone is starting to go through this process, I guess in conversations with them you might pick that they're starting to feel some of these feelings or even experience it physically. I mean, I've read things even like almost gastrointestinal kind of responses can be there. Do you try and talk to them about the fact that these are quite normal? Because I think when you're already grieving something, you can start to worry that you're too sad or you're grieving in the wrong way, which there is no wrong way is there.

00:04:14 Paul

There's no right or wrong way to grieve, apart from perhaps the decision to not grieve or to try to push it away. Grief isn't bad or negative. Grief isn't something to be avoided. If we can grieve it's a necessary response for us. In fact, one of the quotes that I think it's quite helpful for me: *grief is the price you pay for love*. So if you love anyone ever at any point, then it's likely that you'll experience grief. We all want to love. We all want to be loved. But when we lose someone that we love, in particular, grief is the price you pay for that love. And I would want to couch with the people that I talk with, who would have experienced loss and or change and are going through a grief process, is where appropriate to try to normalise it and to encourage people to understand and then embrace the process. We do experience emotions and feelings that are the ones that we would probably choose not to have, that are difficult and challenging emotions.

00:05:23 Paul

Not only is grief not a negative or a bad thing or something to be avoided, I would suggest that it's actually a helpful and healthy thing that can lead us to a point where ultimately instead of those hard to have, or negative feelings that we don't like – sadness, separation, you know, those sorts of things – that ultimately it can lead us to peace, to acceptance and ultimately even to hope.

00:05:47 Paul

Because grief is often linked to love, going through the grief process can help us to live on in the new normal – whatever normal means – so grief isn't about just getting over the loss that we've had. It is about the adapting, adjusting and finding a new life beyond our loss that still incorporates the love for the person who is no longer with us, and I think it enhances our memory and honouring of them if we grieve well.

00:06:15 Kate

So do you have suggestions for things that might help people through that grieving process?

00:06:20 Paul

Don't do it on your own. It's important to recognise that sometimes there are needs to be on your own for personal processing, but not to hide away, and that can be a really difficult thing because sometimes people will have their ideas about how you should grieve. We've already acknowledged that grief is personal and unique to each individual who's experienced it, not just the circumstances of it, but our experience and response to it. And so sometimes we need to find people who are going to be helpful for us that they will just listen. They won't want to urge us to hurry or rush through it or just get over it or hasn't it been long enough now or you should be further down the track than you are? Those sorts of thoughts or comments that others offer and sometimes in our self talk we will tell ourselves can we really unhelpful and unhealthy.

00:07:14 Kate

Paul what are some of the things that people can do to take care of themselves as they go through the grieving process?

00:07:19 Paul

It might sound really simple and basic, but it is really helpful and vital to focus on things like looking after yourself physically. Eating well, getting good sleep, not dropping off any exercise, even if that's simply going for a 20 minute walk. You know, our physiology and our emotions are all interconnected, so to go for a walk and allow our unconsciousness to work on what it's working on and dealing with our emotions is a really helpful thing and also not to deny yourself the opportunity to do things that you enjoy. Sometimes you always say, oh, you know, I've lost my loved one, I'm not allowed to be happy or to have positive and enjoyable experiences. In fact, it's the reverse. We need to be filling our buckets at that time more than any other time. And so whether it's gardening, or spending time with the pets, or going off and seeing a good movie, or things like that. It's important to continue to intentionally build those positive experiences into our life to give us the emotional capacity to be resilient and deal with the aspects of grief that are hard.

00:08:21 Kate

So what services does Helping Hand have to support residents and clients with grief and bereavement?

00:08:27 Paul

Certainly the chaplains that we have across all of our metropolitan care homes and some of our country sites now too are available to support residents who are experiencing grief and loss and their families. But we also have social workers and other staff who will be able to be specifically involved to help and support. In my experience, what I've noticed is that our care staff, our lifestyle staff who get to know people and spend time with our residents on a day to day basis, they're very aware when a resident has gone through some sort of grief or loss experience, and are genuinely and sincerely caring, compassionate and sympathetic. They mightn't always have time to sit for a long period of time, but I think the community that is Helping Hand that surrounds our residents is caring and responsive to people in care in grief and loss, generally not just the people that you can call in who are sort of more the people you'd expect to be able to be offering their supports and services.

00:09:25 Paul

With our home care clients, there are grief and loss groups run by social workers where people who have experienced those things can come together in a safe space and be supported, to become a support group for each other and to receive the direction of input from professional people and social work.

00:10:13 Paul

And most if not all, of our care homes also offer support groups specifically for family members and loved ones of residents who might be living with dementia. And the journey of loved ones and family members of those who have dementia is a journey with grief. Those groups bring people together who can talk about their unique aspects. The grieving before the person has actually died. Their sense of 'I'm grieving, but others don't get it. They're going: well, your mum's still alive, why are you grieving? Why are you sad?' But of course, the experience of those closest is well, it's not the one that I used to have. She's not the same person exactly that I used to know. She's still in there somewhere. That's sort of the support group to be able to reflect on those issues and for people to share their stories and go, oh, that person gets what I'm going through because they're facing the same sort of thing is a really valuable thing that is offered by Helping Hand as well.

00:10:51 Kate

I was thinking too, do you deal when people have come from living at home for most of their life and then they move into a residential care home, for example. Do you sometimes have to help them through grieving the life that they've left behind to now be in this new phase of life?

00:11:06 Paul

One of the things I hope I always address when I meet somebody who's just moved into one of our care homes is to acknowledge with them that they've been through a big change. And I said earlier on that grief is our response to change, and there are people who come in to live in their care homes even where they have recognised it's the best decision for them - it's a big challenge. And so yes, there is a grief response to what they've lost, and they're looking forward to things that are now available to them that weren't previously. Family members also go through the whole range of emotions. Am I doing the right thing? Am I letting my mum and dad down? Am I being a bad son or daughter because we've made this decision? And so ideally to be able to support them and say that you've made the best possible decision for your loved one. But there is a change, you know, in the way that you'll see them and interact with them, so there's definitely grief associated with that change.

00:12:02 Kate

So can families make arrangements to talk with you as well? Not just the residents?

00:12:05 Paul

Yeah, we're definitely available for that. We try to provide information in the information pack as each new resident arrives, that describes what chaplaincy services are for the residents, but also for the family members. That's not just when they first arrive, but potentially as the different changes that happen as the resident stays with us over those remaining years of their life. There are other aspects of grief that will become a normal part of that journey as well. There are ways that Helping Hand can assist in directing people to support, which includes a long list of a whole range of different resources that people can reach out to and access themselves, including some that are available online, if that's easy for people rather than thinking about talking to somebody, face to face, and they are also 24/7. So if it's a crisis too, that there is support available.

00:12:58 Kate

And we will make sure that we include a list of all of those available services on the show notes for this podcast. Paul, if you were going to give one piece of advice about grief and bereavement that you'd like listeners to take away from this episode, what would that be?

00:13:11 Paul

Grief isn't a bad or negative thing. It will not be an easy thing, but it's necessary. It's probably unavoidable. It's personal, and it's about helping us to live with peace, acceptance and hope on the other side of the loss that we have experienced.

00:13:30 Kate

Thank you so much, Paul. It's been a really great discussion.

00:13:32 Paul

Thank you.

00:13:37 Kate

Kate: For more information on Helping Hand and their services please head to www.helpinghand.org.au or call Helping Hand directly on 1300 653 600.