

FRIENDS INDEED

National Centre for Childhood Grief • Newsletter

nccg
NATIONAL CENTRE FOR
CHILDHOOD GRIEF



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Working together to support
bereaved children and their families
childhoodgrief.org.au

The World in Chaos

Dr Elizabeth Mann – Clinical Director

Despite the appealing appearance and sound of the words '2020', the year has not begun well. Bushfires and floods created stress and intense grief for many; compassion fatigue and feelings of helplessness for others. Before any of us have recovered our equilibrium, the COVID-19 pandemic, with resulting community panic has now leapt to centre stage. The world feels chaotic! Daily news bulletins tend to increase general feelings of helplessness, feelings of everything being out of control. How do we gain perspective and create oases of calm in the midst of it all?

Many people are understandably feeling overwhelmed, stressed, anxious, worried, fearful and sad. Many are already experiencing physical symptoms associated with stress - headaches, tummy upsets, difficulty sleeping, exhaustion, and difficulty concentrating. All of our familiar reactions to stress are likely to surface, including those on the anger continuum from mild frustration, to irritability and anger. These are familiar reactions for people experiencing acute grief, a time when our personal world feels out of control. We scarcely recognise ourselves, let alone a world that no longer feels safe or secure.

I find myself wondering how grieving families might be faring with the impact of the current world crisis on an already destabilised family system. What happens to each individual's experience and expression of grief? Is it magnified, or does numbness mean that current community craziness has little impact? How do grieving families support their children, already fearful because their beliefs about a safe, predictable world have been challenged? How do they provide oases of calm in the midst of chaos?

For people struggling to survive as they learn how to manage acute grief and are probably having difficulty putting one foot after the other, I imagine that empty supermarkets, hand washing and self-isolation might seem like the straw that breaks the camel's back. The world outside the home certainly doesn't appear to be providing much needed calm for anyone.

So what CAN we do? There is no simple answer, but there are a few things we CAN do to maintain some sense of order. First, we need to identify the things that remain in our control. Maintaining a familiar daily routine immediately comes to mind as something that creates a feeling of safety and predictability for all of us, and especially so for children.

We need to look after our bodies by eating nutritious food and including regular exercise from very gentle to more active, depending on our age, health status and ability. We need enough sleep, or rest periods if sleep is elusive. We

need to have fun – difficulty if our predominant feeling is sadness or anxiety, but possible if we try to use movies, TV programs, board games, and so on as a stimulus.

"MOST IMPORTANTLY, WE NEED TO STAY CONNECTED TO PEOPLE WE LOVE AND WHO CARE ABOUT US. GRIEF IS LONELY. GRIEF IN QUARANTINE CAN BE EVEN LONELIER, UNLESS WE MAKE GOOD USE OF RESOURCES LIKE EMAIL, TEXT MESSAGES, VIDEO AND PHONE CALLS."

These are invaluable when we are isolated for any reason, and one of the valuable aspects of our modern society. As I think of pandemics in the past, and the pain and loneliness people would have experienced when isolated without any means of connecting with others, I am grateful for some of the privileges we have at our disposal.

We also need to make sure we are hearing accurate information from approved and trusted professionals. Inaccurate gossip tends to increase anxiety and is best avoided. On the other hand, being well informed can be empowering, but we need to limit the amount of news coverage we watch, read or listen to, and carefully monitor what children are exposed to.

Another empowering activity for all ages is to focus on small, achievable tasks, reminders that there are some things we CAN control, and do well. We need to help our children feel as if they are part of a family team that is capable of setting goals, controlling what is controllable, letting go of those things outside our abilities, and of having fun in the midst of chaos. Family exercise or relaxation sessions can fulfil two goals at the same time, for example, we could attempt a few complex yoga positions or stretches that allow us to laugh at ourselves. I imagine you'll think of your own way of achieving what I'm imagining.

Finally, I want to remind you that 'A Friend's Place' is somewhere you can find an anchor, a safe and secure place in the chaos of grief, and in a world that seems to have gone a little crazy. All of our counsellors understand how out of control grief feels, much of the time, and how some people might feel as if their personal experience and that of their grieving family, appears to have been diminished by current events. It may feel at times as if nobody cares. We DO care.

"OUR COUNSELLING SERVICES ARE NOW AVAILABLE ONLINE VIA VIDEO. WE ALSO CONTINUE TO PROVIDE EMAIL AND PHONE SUPPORT."

In that way, we hope we can help to provide a small oasis of calm in a world gone crazy.



To make a donation visit our website childhoodgrief.org.au/donate/ or call us on 1300 654 556.

MAGIC DAY

Natalie Hartley - Counselling Coordinator

We were very fortunate to have Peter Kazacos OAM, founder of the Southern Highlands based charity, *Your Angel*, generously donate his time and magic skills. We were first introduced to Peter in early 2019 through a presentation of his *NAO Robotics for Kids Program*, which is designed to help children living with Autism, developmental, social, emotional and behavioural challenges. During this extraordinary demonstration where we met NAO, one of the interactive humanoid robots used in the program, we also learnt that *Your Angel* supported many other youth orientated programs, one of those being Kaz Magic. Specially designed to teach key life skills for young people aged 8 to 12 years through the process of learning to perform magic, it seemed like the perfect adjunct to our bereavement counselling programs, where we also seek to build confidence and resilience through creativity and play. We would like to acknowledge Peter for his passionate investment and dedication to those vulnerable in the community and to extend a heartfelt thank you for sharing some of his care and support to our hurting and vulnerable families.

Betsy, one of our Children's Counsellors, now shares a magic story from the day.



CONNECTION, UNDERSTANDING AND MAGIC

Betsy Hill – Children's Counsellor

Perhaps we all need these things in our lives but none more so than the grieving children that come to 'A Friend's Place'. Knowing we are not alone and that there are other people who have been through what we are going through is one of the reasons we run our fortnightly groups during term time for our children who are managing life following the death of a parent.

For many reasons not all of the children we see at the Centre are able to come to group so in the October school holidays we were able to hold a special 'Magic Day' to enable more of our kids the opportunity to meet other children who could understand first hand having had someone precious in their lives die.

Knowing that there are other people who have been through a similar experience means a great deal and ... brave children grieving the death of a much loved parent or sibling tentatively arrived at 'A Friends' Place' and made their way into the group room, some on their own and others in the company of their siblings, to be greeted by the many counsellors and office staff who had also come along to enjoy the day and support the children. Inside they found pillows and sheets of paper scattered on the floor and in the middle of the room, a real magician!

Friendships began tentatively at first as the children worked in groups to learn the many different magic tricks, from magically releasing a bead from a string to illusive card tricks. Each member of the group had an opportunity during the day to perform one of the tricks to the large group, building up their confidence in front of

the supportive audience of learners. The children began to play and chat over delicious watermelon at morning tea and by our lunchtime sausage sizzle friendships were being discovered and laughter was ringing out from their play.

At the end of the day the children put the last of their tricks and the magic newspaper trees into their show bags, now brimming over with their other tricks and the prizes they'd won in the lucky dips along the way.

"THE SMILES ON THE CHILDREN'S FACES AS THE YOUNG MAGICIANS GREETED THEIR PARENTS SHOWED US ALL THAT MAGIC CAN HAPPEN EVEN IN THE MIDST OF LIFE ALTERING GRIEF."



BLACKMORE'S SYDNEY RUNNING FESTIVAL 2019

Annette Gurr – Development Manager

A huge thank you to all our BSRF Bridge Run participants last year, including our very own Team NCCG, our 'A Friend's Place' Families, our corporate partner, Team Merck, and those who we don't know personally but who chose our charity this year. One of those was William Young who shares his story as to why he chose the NCCG to support for this event.

"WHEN I DECIDED ON RUNNING THE SYDNEY MARATHON, I WANTED TO RAISE MONEY FOR A CHARITY THAT HAD MEANING TO ME AND THIS IS WHY I CHOSE THE NCCG. IN 2009, I LOST MY BIG BROTHER IN A MOTORCYCLE RACING ACCIDENT, WHICH WAS BACK HOME IN NORTHERN IRELAND. I WAS 14 YEARS OF AGE AT THE TIME AND NOTHING COULD HAVE AFFECTED ME AS MUCH AS LOSING HIM - HE WAS MY IDOL. I KNOW FIRST HAND HOW IMPORTANT IT IS THAT CHILDREN GET THE CORRECT HELP AND SUPPORT, AS GRIEF HAS SUCH A MASSIVE INFLUENCE IN THE REST OF THEIR LIVES. LONG MAY THE NCCG CONTINUE TO DO THE MUCH NEEDED WORK THAT THEY DO."

I also wish to thank all those who supported our teams and families via donation - we smashed our initial target of \$7.5k by doubling it, with a final amount of \$15.6k. All the funds generated from this weekend have made a significant contribution to our bereavement counselling programs, in particular our individual children's sessions, and for that we are incredibly grateful.



GIRLS ADVENTURE WEEKEND 2019

Annette Gurr – Development Manager

In November, the Peter Coupland Adventure Weekend for bereaved girls was held. This program is a special adjunct to our regular counselling programs. It was named in memory of our dearly loved and valued counsellor, Peter Coupland. He introduced this program in the hope that every child who took part would be encouraged to confront their fears and build resilience. One boys and one girls weekend is held annually. Through a combination of different adventure experiences, group activities and discussion, having fun and relaxing together, the children find these weekends help them feel less alone and more able to live with their grief.

The main objectives of this program are to:

- Address and reduce social isolation, fear and loneliness
- Encourage confidence
- Normalise bereaved girls and bereaved boys experiences
- Know they are not alone – others have experienced similar and can relate
- Learn to manage intense feelings as they arise

Following the girls camp, most parents indicated that children felt less different and alone in their grief. Strong themes of feeling more confident, secure and the learning of new ways to manage grief were also found.

Comments from Parents [Names withheld]:

“She has a greater sense of normalisation of her experience in life, and that you can have a really fun time with people who have also been through some tough stuff.”

“SHE IS MORE CONFIDENT NOW AND HAS DEVELOPED NEW POSITIVE COPING METHODS.”

“They have more of an understanding that its ok to be yourself. I feel it's improved their confidence around having a parent that has passed away and that they are no different to anyone else.”

“... FRIENDSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT TO BUILD WITH PEOPLE WHO UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU'RE FEELING AND THIS HAS BEEN IMPORTANT FOR MY DAUGHTER. SHE'S BEEN KEEPING IN TOUCH WITH SOME OF THE GIRLS SHE MET AT CAMP.”

“That is the most important aspect as a parent for me. I love that they had an opportunity to be around other little girls that have experienced similar loss and grief.”

Overall the weekend was another huge success in terms of meeting our objectives, with all of the girls hoping to participate again next year and many parents noting their overwhelming gratitude for being offered this opportunity.

Belinda, one of our Adult counsellors, who has also been with the Centre volunteering in a children's support worker capacity for many years now, shares her experience of the last girl's weekend.



GIRLS ADVENTURE WEEKEND 2019

Belinda Dunn – Adult Counsellor

Last November, 17 girls took part in our annual Peter Coupland Girls' Adventure Weekend at Yarrabin on the outskirts of Bathurst. These weekends are a highlight of our calendar, both for the children and our team. Despite understandable nervousness among the girls, it did not take long for previous connections to be re-ignited and new friendships to be formed. We were also joined by Katerina, Milana, and Jess, three young women from our Young Adult's Group who were a valuable support to the team and wonderful role models. We thank these women for their willingness to give their time to support and care for the girls, and for sharing what they have learned through their own experiences of grief.

On arriving at Yarrabin it was evident that the property was in severe drought after many months without rain. Despite this hardship, we were warmly welcomed by Annie and her team, whose generous hospitality, horse riding instruction and delicious country cooking were greatly appreciated by all.

Over the course of the weekend, we enjoyed a number of fun activities, including: horse riding; tennis; eating; swimming; card games ('tongues' and 'cheat' being particular favourites); playing pool; eating; a bush barbecue; toasting marshmallows; tractor riding; whip cracking; and eating! While the food was a highlight for the team, horse riding was a clear favourite with the girls. They enthusiastically (and a little tentatively) rode each day through the surrounding countryside. It was lovely to see the joy on the girls' faces when they returned having bravely tried something new or having gained greater confidence and skills than when they last rode. Also evident was the comradery among the girls as they encouraged and supported each other and together shared laughter and stories about their horses and their riding prowess.

The weekend also provided an opportunity for the girls to unite in their grief. Grief can be a lonely and isolating

journey but coming together as a group there was a strong sense of community. In this safe environment the girls were able to share and express what they hold in memory and legacy of their parent who has died. The girls made beautiful hearts adorned with words and photos to honour their parent, created meaningful journals and participated in a reflective poolside candle ceremony. The girls talked openly about what they miss about their parent, reflected on what they had learnt about themselves and considered the ways in which their parent would be proud of them.

"REMEMBERING IS KEY TO LOVING IN ABSENCE AND EVERYTHING THE GIRLS SHARED HIGHLIGHTED THE DEEP LOVE THEY HAVE FOR THEIR PARENT AND THE RESILIENT WAY IN WHICH THE GIRLS ARE SUSTAINING A MEANINGFUL CONNECTION WITH THEIR PARENT WHILE MOVING FORWARD IN LIFE."

The girls' memories brought many smiles to their faces and a few tears to their eyes.

Travelling home with full hearts and stomachs and looking forward to being re-united with our families, we sang along to High School Musical, the words of which aptly summed up the weekend - "we are all in this together."



OUR SUPPORTERS

Thank you to all those who are working with us in varying capacities to support bereaved children and their families. The donations given to the Centre make a real difference in achieving positive outcomes for the children and families that we care for. This support varies from donations of goods and skills, time and resources, to capital funding for our bereavement programs. Over the last year we have attracted funding from both existing and new supporters. We would like to thank the individuals and organisations for your generous contributions. Your donations ensure we can continue to provide our valuable services to our grieving families.



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