

Supporting Health Professionals' Emotional Reactions to Grief and Loss

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Background: There is a body of research suggesting that health professionals experience difficulties with managing their own emotional reactions when exposed to patients'/carers' grief and loss. Staff surveys further indicate there is a lack of resources within the workplace to support them with this.

A quality project was implemented at the Royal Melbourne Hospital to investigate if a workshop could assist staff in developing strategies to effectively manage their emotional reactions to grief and loss. In addition, this initiative sought to promote a culture of normalising health professionals' emotional responses.

Method:

Benchmarking email to members of OT Australia Oncology/ Palliative Care SIG exploring support systems

- Literature review.
- OT staff survey on experiences in dealing with their own emotional reactions to grief and loss.
- Development of written resources.
- Staff in-service on Managing Emotional Reactions to Grief and Loss.
- Post-survey to guide future directions.

Results:

- Evidence from the literature highlighted the importance of both self-care and support to assist health professionals' management of grief and loss (Flowers et al. 2014; Hadley 2014).
- The pre-survey revealed that the majority (91%) of staff are exposed to patient and/or carer grief and loss at least monthly. Staff often debriefed with team members, yet many noted they didn't have any formal strategies or support in place. SIG members also echoed these findings.
- A staff in-service was conducted educating clinicians on strategies to assist with managing their emotional health. Clinicians were provided with an opportunity to discuss their emotional reactions with facilitator support. Case-studies were discussed in small groups focusing on strategy implementation
- Post-survey results were positive.

Discussion:

This project demonstrated the effectiveness of an education program to support health professionals' management of grief and loss. Staff particularly found small group discussions on clinical scenarios useful. Future directions include education for supervisors supporting other staff and students.