Grief Off the Clock: Supporting Hospice Professionals Through Personal Loss

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Let’s start with what we know...

...not much, unfortunately

• Research has largely been focused on the effect of *professional loss* and management strategies

• Virtually no research has investigated the impact of *personal loss* for hospice workers
Let’s start with what we know...

- Professional loss has been researched in many different types of hospice workers:

  CERTIFIED NURSE ASSISTANTS
  NURSES
  SOCIAL WORKERS
  MEDICAL STUDENTS
  DOCTORS
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  CERTIFIED NURSE ASSISTANTS
  NURSES
  SOCIAL WORKERS
  MEDICAL STUDENTS
  DOCTORS
  CHAPLAINS
  VOLUNTEERS
  ETHICS COMMITTEE MEMBERS
  VISITING SANTAS
What we don’t know

• What impact does personal loss have on the hospice worker’s ability to do his/her job well?
• What impact does hospice work have on a person’s grief process?
Personal vs. Professional Loss

- Social Support
- Culturally sanctioned rituals
- Symptoms of grief are pervasive
- Formal Support (possible)
- Need to continue on in spite of grief
- Symptoms may be confined to workplace or specific settings

So, what happens when both types of losses occur at the same time?
Themes

• Grief is universal.
• Grief as a hospice worker is unique.
• Hospice work created challenges with family dynamics.
• Personal grief changes the nature of hospice work.
Grief is Universal

My grief looks like what I see in my clients’ families!

- This can create a variety of reactions:
  - Comfort
  - Disappointment
  - Deeper Compassion
  - Hopelessness
Grief as a Hospice Worker is Unique.

Denial isn’t an option and I know bargaining won’t work.

- Not all “normal” grief reactions are possible
- Work is not an escape or distraction
- Work environment is supportive and understanding
Challenges to Family Dynamics

*It isn’t clear what my role is.*

- Personal loss blurs boundaries
  - Looked to for professional tasks
  - Ignored as a professional
- Clinical choices can lead to hostility
- Grief proceeds at a different pace
Changes at Work

I’m not the same employee I was before.

• Negative
  – Difficulty focusing on patient as separate from the loved one
  – Grief triggered at work

• Positive
  – Personal loss enhanced capacity for caring
  – Work gave space to process grief
  – Work gave a chance to “do it right”
Where do we go from here?

- Currently, there are 4,199 hospice agencies in the U.S. alone.
- We need to know:
  - What impact personal loss is having on their work
  - What impact their work is having on their grief process
  - What impact their work is having on their families
  - The best methods to support them

Questions?
References


References


Manna, M. (December 16, 2009). Hospice Santas face grief, kids’ hard questions. *USA Today*, 7d.


