

Death and Dying in Families: Supporting Bereaved Family Members

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Presenter Disclosure

- **Speaker:** Ian Scott
- **Relationships with commercial interests:**

None.

Mitigating Potential Bias

- Not applicable

Learning Objectives:

- Generate ideas for supporting family members who experience the death of someone close to them
- Summarize the tenets of supporting bereaved family members
- Describe some of the unique challenges facing a bereaved family, including conflict, anticipatory grieving and support for children

Quiz!



1. It's essential to know the specific grief rituals of different cultural groups.

True / False

2. Anticipatory grieving is an opportunity to explore the meaning of the relationship.

True/False

3. It is ok to ask children what they miss and don't miss about a person.

True/False

General Observations About Grief

- There is no right or wrong way to grieve
- Grief has no set timetable
- Grieving often involves extreme thoughts and rollercoaster emotions – can affect our whole self
- Grief can be affected by a number of factors
- Grieving requires support, empathy and validation from others



Ideas for Supporting Bereaved Family Members

- The “101”:
 - Opening ourselves to the presence of grief
 - Acknowledging uniqueness of grief
 - Accessing the feelings related to grief
 - Affirming the decision to seek support

Ideas for Supporting Bereaved Family Members

- Some finer details to explore with families:
 - The final moments
 - Role changes
 - Post-death logistics (planning, finances, etc.)
 - Cultural traditions – curiosity and respect
 - Anniversaries and holidays

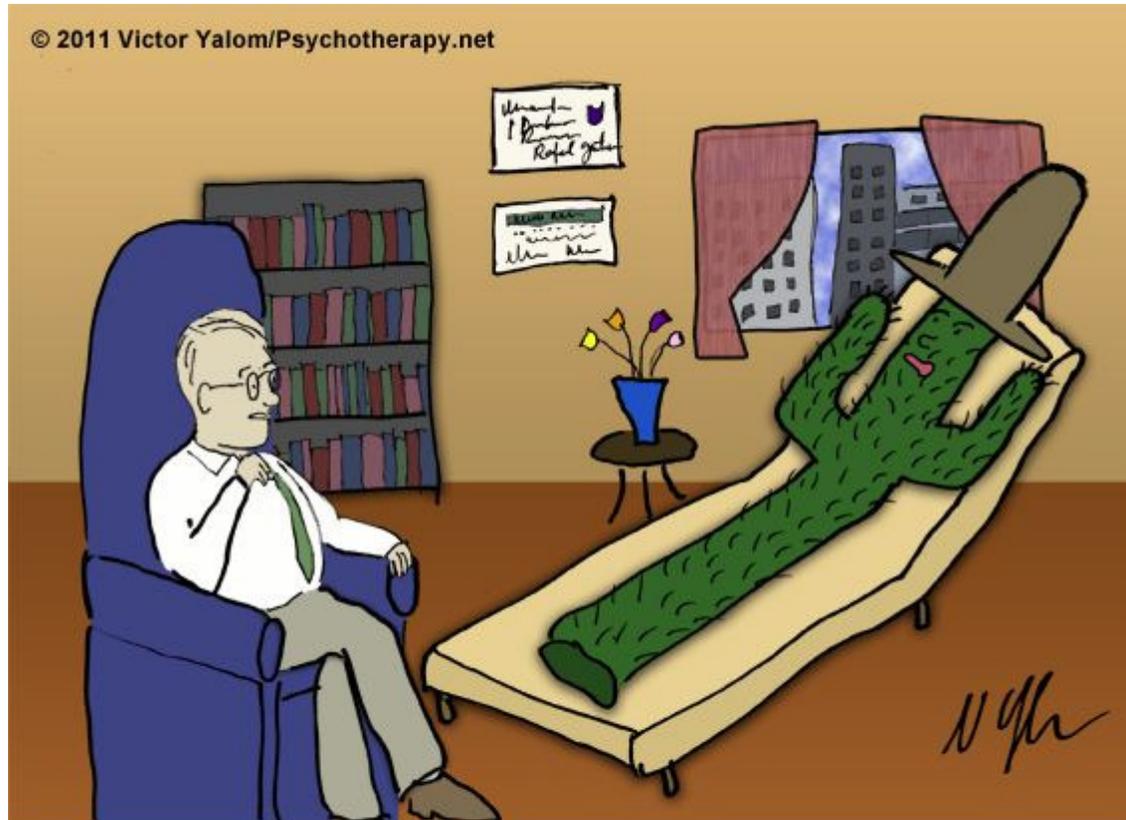


Ideas for Supporting Bereaved Family Members

For the Health Care Provider:

- Meet family members individually or as a group
- Ask open-ended Qs: “What has this experience been like for you and your family?”
- Validate the unknown timeline: “Grieving can be different for everyone, what has it been like for you?”
- Activities include letter writing, journaling, memorializing
- Language – be careful with “normal”, “loved one”, clichés
- Can be single or multiple sessions

Conflict in the Family



"We weren't what I would call a 'touchy-feely' family"

Conflict in the Family

- Frequently encountered in psychosocial oncology
- Communication breakdowns
- Different ways of handling grief - talk, cry, rage or silence
- Intra-family conflict and family/friend tension
- Comforting in, dumping out
- Many people have mixed feelings – ambivalence

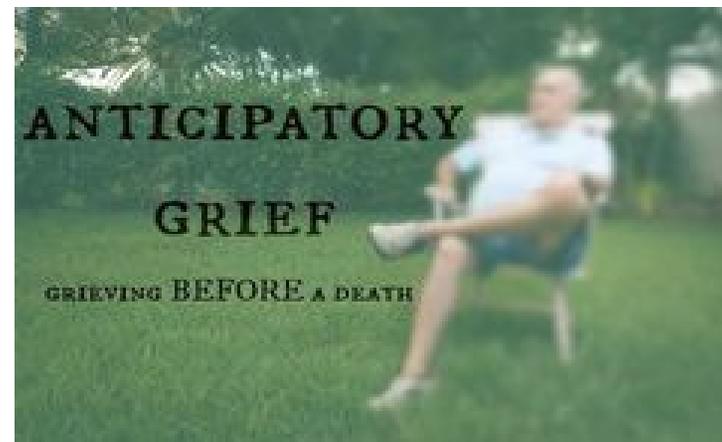
Conflict in the Family

- Careful with the concept of “forgiveness”
- Take inventory of entire relationship
- Relationships are not simplistic or perfect!
- These discussions can feel unsanctioned or immoral – our job is to make space for these discussions to occur



Anticipatory Grieving

- Becoming a single parent, role changes, etc.
- Family members grieve at their own pace and willingness to talk about mortality varies
- An opportunity to explore:
 - Meaning of the relationship
 - What someone wants to say before a death
 - Spiritual concerns
 - Advanced care planning



Support for Children

- Andrea Warnick – **Cause, Catch, Cure and Care** (Adults often have the same concerns!)



- Young people are not elevators
- Opportunities to talk, be involved and a way to remember the person who died
- Opportunities for play and recreation
- Someone to listen to their fears, fantasies and questions
- In terms of conflict, ask what they miss and don't miss about the person – validate mixed feelings

Case Study #1 – Hillary

- Dad died from lung cancer
- Mom experiences anger – Hillary grieves with tears
- Hilary describes mom’s trauma from residential school legacy
- Hilary’s partner – not wanting to be around Hillary when she is crying
- Was absent in final moments
- Planning and paying for funeral – “planning for them to die”
- Social media photos of ceremony

Case Study # 2 – Ken and Thomas

- Anticipatory – Ken Stage III NSCLC – receiving RT and Chemotherapy
- Ken considers diagnosis to be a positive development – strengthened his faith and resolve to cope with cancer
- Son Thomas asks – “Doesn’t he know that cancer can be fatal?”
- Thomas anticipating a potential loss but feels unable to address it with his dad

Case Study #3 – Mona

- Husband Theo diagnosed with metastatic renal CA
- 2 young children – ages 3 and 6
- Anticipatory – becoming a single parent
- Discussed how to talk about the illness with the children
- Building a bridge between dad and the kids
- Blurring of roles: Partner/Caregiver

Quiz!



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True / False

2. Anticipatory grieving is an opportunity to explore the meaning of the relationship

True / False

3. It is ok to ask children what they miss and don't miss about a person.

True / False

Take Home Message

- *Remember the “101”:*
 - Opening ourselves to the presence of grief
 - Acknowledging uniqueness of grief
 - Accessing the feelings related to grief
 - Affirming the decision to seek support
- Trust yourself– there is no script
- Are we taking care of our own stuff?

