

# Coping with Grief



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*Otago Tertiary Chaplaincy Trust Board 2011*

## COVER PHOTO

The cover photo shows a branch of Tom Li's memorial cherry tree in blossom on campus, near the Otago University Staff Club. Tom was an Otago student from China who died unexpectedly during 2006. This photo is used with the permission of Tom's parents, and was taken by Greg Hughson.

# INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOKLET is intended to help you feel less alone and more able to cope with your grief. As Chaplains, we extend our deepest sympathy to you at this sad time. We are available to support you now and on into the future. Our thoughts and prayers are with you, your friends, colleagues and families at this sad time.

When a death occurs, many people are affected by the loss, although sometimes we may feel as if we are the only one grieving. Those directly affected may include the dead person's immediate family and relatives, friends and flatmates, teaching staff, medical care givers and others. At such times we all need support from each other.

In recent times (early 2011) we have experienced huge earthquakes, both in Christchurch and off the coast of Japan. Events such as these, which result in the sudden death of large numbers of people, lead to whole communities and nations being plunged into a deep experience of grief and loss. At such times we need to stand together, to commemorate together and to grieve together.

Grieving is the process whereby we will eventually come to terms with the loss we have suffered. Grief is a necessary and essential part of normal life, whether it is grieving for a physical death, a shift away from home, the breaking of a relationship or any other change in life.

The experience of loss can be sudden or gradual and is always bewildering. When we have had no fore-warning of a sudden death for example, the grief we experience on hearing the news will be traumatic and intense. At such times we need help and support from others who are not traumatised. If our grief is suppressed, if we try and deny how we are feeling our grief will re-emerge later.

So it is important to accept our feelings, to gradually face up to and accept the reality of what has happened and to work through our grief with the help and support of others. Our grief is unique to us. When we grieve deeply, perhaps for the first time, we may feel very alone and lost in uncharted territory.

Sometimes the change and loss we face, and the grief we end up experiencing, can be very difficult to handle. Most people say they feel stronger, more sensitive and more aware after having to deal with a significant loss. Their lives gradually grow out around their loss and they find ways to make meaning from what's happened. They can move forward in positive ways.

But grief *is* a difficult thing to live with, and live through. Looking for help and support makes sense. Grieving is a bewildering experience and during such times we no longer feel like ourselves. We can even begin to miss "the old me". During such times we can expect to behave differently or act out of character. One day you'll be able to support someone else going through tough times. Find people you trust to talk with about what it's like for you.

## What has caused my Grief?

**Grief can be experienced as a result of changes arising from**

death dying bereavement illness family break-up disability

accident injury

broken friendships moving being a victim of crime failing exams bullying

foster care making a big mistake family conflict sexual abuse

unemployment death of a pet new family situations someone in prison

getting pregnant physical abuse

addictions or dependence (such as on alcohol, gambling or drugs)

## The Basic Patterns of Loss and Grief

EACH OF US will experience the journey in unique ways. However there are basic components to the grief process which are often experienced. As individuals we may have to go through the whole process a number of times, or move backwards and forwards between the stages. Ideally at the end of this process, however long it might take, we will have achieved a new sense of self.

### **LOSS**

we lose someone close to us.

## **SHOCK**

The initial impact is too much to handle. We cope by doing only what is essential, in a mechanical way.

## **DENIAL**

Our mind and body shield us from reality. We may experience strange feelings, dissociation, think we see our loved one, imagine they are not really dead. There is a holding on before a letting go. But seeing the body, attending the funeral, talking about what has happened, all help us move to acceptance of our new feelings.

## **DEEP SORROW**

Great sorrow, crying, deep aching sadness that may return much later in waves, unexpectedly. Depression, in which we may feel hopeless and helpless. We need to weep, to talk, to be alone, to be with friends.

## **ANGER**

The energy that moves us towards healing. We may be angry with God. This is acceptable, God can take it. (See Psalm 142 vs. 2 )We may be angry with doctors, with family or with our friends. We may even be angry with the dead person for leaving us. We may want to express our hurt directly to the deceased. This often happens in Maori culture during the tangi when all sorts of honest emotions are spoken to the deceased. This is healthy.

## **IDEALISATION**

Out of our love for our loved one we idealise their memory. We tend to forget the bad times, remembering only the positive aspects of our loved one's personality and enhancing these aspects. We find ourselves needing to honour our loved one, to talk about them in a positive way, to write about and commemorate their contribution to our life and the life of the world.

## **GETTING A GRIP ON IT ALL**

We begin to gain perspective, to let go of the past – and healing begins. We begin to move on with new resolve and new directions. This active step brings fresh energy, and we search for new meanings that make sense to us now.

## ACCEPTANCE

A new relationship develops with our dead relative or friend. We are left with realistic memories and slowly integrate their meaning into our life as a whole.

## How do we react when someone dies?

WHEN SOMEONE we know personally dies, we may find ourselves reacting in some of these ways:

- With disbelief
- With denial that this has really happened
- With anger directed at God, at other people, or at the person who has died
- With the feeling that part of us is now missing
- With a sense of personal guilt

We will express our grief in different ways too, showing a range of emotions and behaviours:

- Crying
- Becoming sad and withdrawn
- Venting our anger
- Becoming irritable and moody
- Suddenly switching moods
- Feeling helpless
- Carrying on as if nothing has happened, burying our real feelings
- Behaving out of character
- Losing control of how we behave
- Trying to lose ourselves in our work
- Increasing our social life to escape the pain
- Using alcohol or drugs to deaden the emotional pain.



## But I'm hurting – what can I do right now?

YOU MAY FEEL it is against your nature to seek help because you want to be independent, or prefer to let others see that you're okay and don't need help. Perhaps you're afraid to seek help, in case you're seen as weak and not coping. You may worry that you'll clam up, not knowing what to say, and that you will be embarrassed as a result. It can be worth breaking through these excuses. Take the initiative to talk to someone else about how you are feeling. You will feel a great deal better if you do.

## Who can I talk to?

YOU CAN TALK to anyone who will share and understand your feelings, but some people can be especially helpful. Contact numbers for some of these people are provided at the back of this booklet.

- a close family member
- a personal friend
- a staff member you respect and trust
- a Chaplain
- a Student health counsellor or GP
- your local pastor, priest or minister
- a Victim support volunteer
- a lifeline telephone counsellor

## How can I help myself?

GRIEF IS PART of being human, and it changes us. We cannot go back to where we were before. We can only move forward. We come to terms with a grief only when we have fully experienced the pain of the loss which has triggered our grief. So allow yourself time to grieve. And allow yourself not to grieve. Give yourself permission to let it go and have some fun.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. There is only your way. How we grieve depends on the kind of person we are and how important our loss is to us personally.

When we are grieving these activities may help :

- write a poem about this grief or death expressing how you are feeling
- put a special photo of the person you have lost into a frame
- write down all you know and remember about the person
- visit a special place you shared, and leave something there in memory of the person who has died.
- write a letter saying goodbye. You might be able to read your letter at a special place or in a memorial service. But it doesn't have to be anything more than your private letter to the person you have lost.
- join a support group dealing with loss and grief. (contact the Chaplains for information about such groups)
- physical exercise

## Helping others through their grief

RECOGNISING ANOTHER person's pain and a willingness to listen and respond can assist them to deal with their grief, and to express it in ways which will lead to healing and restoration.

But be aware that someone else's grief can remind us of our own losses and our own hurts and fears. Try not to unload your personal agenda, especially your religious agenda, onto the grieving person. Show your care in thoughtful ways that are comfortable for you. In talking with the person, don't dodge the grief or pretend that nothing has happened. . An honest approach is the best one.

Listen, talk, cry or just spend time together. Offer a practical gift such as food, or a personal gift. Take or send flowers, a card, a letter of sympathy. Offer practical help or companionship, such as an outing together to see a movie, take a walk, go shopping or visit a friend together. Be yourself in whatever you do.

## FAITH RESOURCES

### What does religion say about death?

Grief inevitably asks the question, Why ?

For many, the deepest wisdom we can bring to that question is provided by one or other of the religious faith traditions present in our community. Death is still an ultimate mystery and a wonder, and it is hardly surprising that among people of different religious faiths there is no single view of death and what follows death.

However, religious traditions all agree that the rituals and ceremonies associated with death should help those left behind to respect and honour the dead person, draw together those who grieve for mutual support, allow mourners to express their personal sorrow and affirm the continuing meaning and value of life in the face of death.

In Maori culture, for instance, the tangihanga, or funeral ceremony, is the Maori way of managing grief. For Maori, more than for Western traditions, grief is a family and communal experience. A tangi respects the fact that mourning is a process, not a single event, and typically the ceremony lasts three days. The body lies on the marae or in a home and all are welcome to come and pay their respects and offer comfort to the bereaved. There is nothing mysterious about the process but it may be quite formal. Etiquette (kawa) will vary from iwi to iwi, and those unfamiliar with the protocol should ask or arrange to be with someone who is familiar with the local kawa.

There are a wide range of beliefs about life after death held by people of different faiths. An excellent new interfaith resource has recently been produced by the New Zealand Funeral Director's Association, entitled "Last Words". (see references for details)

Christians believe in resurrection after death; that after death the soul of the person may be given a new spiritual body and enjoy eternal life with God. This idea is based on the life, teaching and resurrection of Jesus Christ. However, there is great diversity of understanding regarding the specific nature of the

afterlife within the Christian faith. As the Apostle Paul wrote “we see through a glass darkly” ( 1 Corinthians 13:12). Paul also wrote that “nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God”. (Romans 8:35-39 )

Some faiths hold a “cyclical” view of life, believing that the soul may survive death and return many times to this world as a different creature. For Hindus and Buddhists, after many lifetimes, a person may be rewarded with a higher life; an escape from life in this world, with its cycle of pain and suffering.

There are other religious traditions which share the belief that the soul survives death. For a Jewish or Muslim person a good life on earth is rewarded with the blessedness of heaven in the presence of God; just as there is punishment after death for a bad life.

Some believe that there is no God and no life after death. Death is simply the end. The atheist Bertrand Russell said, “There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendour, no vastness anywhere - only triviality for a moment and then nothing.”

In many religious traditions, such as those of Maori and other Polynesian peoples, it is believed that the dead are always present. Their memory is evoked on formal occasions, and every such occasion contains elements of mourning and remembering the departed ones.



## FOR INSTITUTIONS AND STAFF

THE UNEXPECTED DEATH of a student or staff member, or a death after prolonged illness, is a shock and a hurt that has to be faced and dealt with. Regular work and classes have to go on at the same time that people are trying to adjust to what has happened. Sometimes an event such as this releases older and different griefs, making us realise we haven't done our grieving for previous losses in our lives. So how do we cope ?

We all need support – managers and administrators just as much as academic staff and students. Talk to someone. Get in touch with a Chaplain or a counsellor. They are there for you at just such a time as this. And there are friends and acquaintances to talk with, just as there would be for a situation of personal loss.

Otago University has a critical response plan for helping deal with the unexpected death of a student. The overall responsibility for managing a compassionate response lies with either the Head of the Residential College where a student resides or with the Head of the Department to which the student belonged, with support from Chaplains, the Proctor and Counsellors  
(see <http://www.otago.ac.nz/studentservices/director/html/critical.html>)

As a community or group of staff and students you may wish to publicly recognise and deal with a death that has taken place in your community. Such an acknowledgement might take the form of a special religious service, a formal commemorative gathering or a more informal tree-planting ceremony. Your institution's Chaplain or counsellor can help you discern and plan what is best to do in the circumstances, and will assist you in this.



## Some ideas for dealing as an institution with a death

- It is often a good idea to plan a memorial service , especially as not everyone may have had the opportunity to attend the funeral. Gather some friends together, and perhaps with the help of a Chaplain, work out how to express together the loss which has been experienced as a group. It will be important to liaise with appropriate cultural and religious leaders. Discuss together what individuals and the group want to do and say. If suggestions are needed invite poems (your own or others), written reflections, readings, appropriate music, art, hymns and prayers. Sometimes students have organised power-point visual presentations which can be shown during a memorial service. Arrange for an appropriate place and an order in which to perform these acts of remembrance.
- Arrange for a memorial service to be conducted on campus in some suitable place. Allow an opportunity for individuals to freely express their personal grief. A symbolic action, such as planting a tree, can be helpful as part of such an occasion.
- A display of creative responses to a death - photographs, poems, paintings, a short description of the life of the dead person - might be mounted in a public place for a pre-determined time.

## Selected Poems and Readings

### LOVE MANTRA FOR LETTING GO

I bless you  
I release you  
I set you free  
I set myself free  
I let you be  
I let myself be

*Alla Renee Bozarth*

PRAYER AT A FUNERAL

God who brought us to birth,  
and in whose arms we die,  
in our grief and shock  
contain and comfort us;  
embrace us with your love,  
give us hope in our confusion,  
and grace to let go into new life,  
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

*From Celebrating Women*

by Hannah Ward, Jennifer Wild and Janet Morley

FROM THE BIBLE

*Ecclesiastes 3: 1-3*

There is a season for everything:

A time for giving birth,

A time for dying;

A time for tears,

A time for laughter,

A time for mourning,

A time for dancing .....

*1 Corinthians 15 : 51-54*

BEHOLD, I TELL YOU A MYSTERY. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that it is written "Death is swallowed up in victory".

NOTHING IS LOST ON THE BREATH OF GOD

Nothing is lost on the breath of God,  
Nothing is lost for ever.  
God's breath is love, and that love will remain  
Holding the world forever.  
No feather too light,  
No hair too fine,  
No flower too brief in its glory,  
No drop in the ocean,  
No dust in the air  
But is counted and told in God's story.

Nothing is lost to the eyes of God,  
Nothing is lost for ever.  
God sees with love, and that love will remain  
Holding the world for ever.  
No journey too far,  
No distance too great,  
No valley of darkness too blinding,  
No creature too humble,  
No child too small  
For God to be seeking and finding.

Nothing is lost to the heart of God,  
Nothing is lost forever.  
God's heart is love, and that love will remain  
Holding the world for ever.  
No impulse of love,  
No office of care,  
No moment of life in its fullness,  
No beginning too late,  
No ending too soon  
But is gathered and known in its goodness.

*Colin Gibson*

## Resources and contacts for support

AN EXCELLENT RESOURCE for grief resources and informations is the NZ Skylight Trust. The skylight website is [www.skylight.org.nz](http://www.skylight.org.nz). Their freephone number is 0800 299 100. Skylight supports children, young people and their families through change, loss and grief – whatever its cause.

Otago University Critical incident policy website

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/student-services/director/html/critical.html>

Otago University Chaplaincy

[www.otago.ac.nz/chaplain](http://www.otago.ac.nz/chaplain) and [chaplains@otago.ac.nz](mailto:chaplains@otago.ac.nz)

Ecumenical Chaplains 479 8497 or Catholic Chaplains 479 5438

Otago Polytechnic Chaplaincy

Ecumenical 03 479 6094 Catholic 479 4921

[chaplain@tekotago.ac.nz](mailto:chaplain@tekotago.ac.nz)

Otago University Student Health and Counselling

Health 479 8212 Counselling 479 5173

<http://www.otago.ac.nz/studenthealth/healthinformation.html>

Otago Polytechnic Student Health

Reception 03 479 6082

Counselling 03 479 6082

Victim Support

C/- Dunedin Police Station 03 471 4926

Lifeline

0800 543 354 <http://www.lifeline.co.nz/>

Information for Maori

<http://www.maori.org.nz>



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# University of Otago Commemorative Register

IN 1980 THE UNIVERSITY established a register to record memorial and commemorative features of the University campus. These features include memorial trees, plaques, seats, a bridge and a walk to commemorate the University members who served in World War One.

There are six copies of the Commemorative and Memorial Register . They are located as follows:

- Central Library – Special Collections
- Hocken library/Collections
- Science Library
- Registrar's Office Clocktower
- Property Services Directors Office
- Property Services Grounds Officer's Office

Copies of a University of Otago commemorative register brochure containing information about the location – and photos – of the various memorials can be obtained from the Chaplains.

The commemorative register is also available online via:

*<http://www.propserv.otago.ac.nz/CommemorativeRegister/>*



## From the teaching of Jesus Christ: Matthew 5 v.4

English: God blesses those people who grieve. They will find comfort.

Maori: Ka koa te hunga e tangi ana: ka whakamarietia hoki rātou.

Samoan: Amuia e faanoanoa; aua e faamafanafanaina i latou.

Tongan: Monu'ia 'a kinautolu 'oku tangi he te nau ma'u 'a e fiemalie.

Cook Island Maori: E ao to tei aue: e tārekareka'ia ratou.

Niuean: Uhoaki a lautolu ne fakatutuku: ha ko e mena ke fakamafanatia a lautolu.

French: Heureux ceux qui souffrent car ils seront soulagés.

Spanish: Bienaventurados los que lloran porque ellos recibirán consolación.

Korean: 애통하는 자는 복이 있나니, 저희가 위로를 받을 것임이요.

Japanese: 悲しむ者は幸いです。その人は慰められるからです。

Mandarin: 哀慟的人有福了，因為他們必得安慰。

Swahili (East Africa): Mungu huwabariki wenye uzuni. Maana hao Watafarijika.

Shona (Zimbabwe): Vakakomborerwa zvavo vanochemema,  
Mwari achavanyaradza.

Chewa (Zambia): Mulungu adalisa onse olila, ndipo apeza chintontozo.

Igbo (Nigeria): Ngozi diri ndi na eri uju maka na aga agba ha ume.



[www.otago.ac.nz/chaplain](http://www.otago.ac.nz/chaplain)  
[www.anztca.net.nz](http://www.anztca.net.nz)

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