

**'Give sorrow words: for the grief that does not speak
knits up the o'er wrought heart, and bids it break'**

– *Macbeth* –

The word bereavement means, 'to be robbed of something valued'. Grieving is a process of adjusting to that loss and is universal. Although most often applied when the loss involves a death it can be applied to many other situations.

■ Bereavement is a process

People pass through a number of **stages in grief**, which can vary in sequence and length for each individual.

- ◆ **Stage One – Shock.** The reality of the loss takes time to sink in. Initial reactions vary from numbness, denial, disbelief, hysteria, to not being able to think straight. These natural reactions cushion us against the loss and allow us to feel it more slowly and cope with it better.
- ◆ **Stage Two – Protest.** At this stage the person protests that the loss cannot be real. Strong and powerful feelings occur, such as anger, guilt, sadness, fear, yearning and searching, while the person struggles between denying and accepting the reality of what has happened.
- ◆ **Stage Three – Disorganisation.** This is the stage when the reality of the loss is only too real. This is the low point of the wheel of grief, characterised by bleakness, despair, depression, apathy, anxiety and confusion. The person may feel that the feelings will go on forever.
- ◆ **Stage Four – Reorganisation.** The person begins to rebuild a life, acquiring more balance and being able to choose to remember happier times. The person returns to previous functioning, but often with changed values and new meaning in life.

■ Tasks involved in grieving

① **Accepting the loss:** The starting point of grief is intellectually and emotionally to accept the loss. At first the loss is not taken

in and, for example, the grieving individual may keep all the person's belongings. It takes time for those possessions to be let go.

- ② **Feeling the pain:** This means allowing an array of emotions to be allowed, recognised and experienced. The pain of grief is very real, and as with any pain we try to avoid it, but it is an essential part of the process and must be acknowledged and worked through. Some people will try to avoid that pain by keeping themselves very busy. Other people might defend themselves against the pain by saying to themselves, 'I've got to be strong for everybody else'. Crying about it is undoubtedly helpful as it allows painful feelings to be expressed.
- ③ **Talking about it:** Talking it over and over, and reminiscing helps it to sink in. Talking about regrets, expressing fears and anger is helpful. Do not take the attitude that 'it doesn't help to rake it up'. The listener often just needs to be present to listen, and encourage talk of the deceased.
- ④ **Take one day at a time:** It helps to focus on now, and not to try to take on everything at once. Grieving takes the time it takes, there are no fixed time limits and it is not a process that can be hurried. Do not feel, 'I should have got over this by now'. Expect anniversaries to be times when sad feelings are rekindled.
- ⑤ **Be your own best friend:** Look after yourself; rest, eat well, take time to retreat and time to talk, try not to become too isolated but seek out social support.
- ⑥ **Exercise: a letter from the heart:** When someone dies everyone has things they wished they had said. Write a letter expressing all your feelings; write about the good things and the bad things, the things you most liked and the things you least liked, the things you could never talk about, write about how you will remember the deceased. Say goodbye.