



**Grief &
Bereavement**
L I T E R A C Y S E R I E S

Grief & Bereavement Literacy ECHO Series
SESSION 5, SUMMARY NOTES: "Grief & Loss During the Holidays"

Tuesday, December 5th, 2023
12:00pm – 1:00pm PST, via Zoom

AGENDA ITEM	DISCUSSION
<p>Introduction & Territory Acknowledgment</p>	<p>Grief & Bereavement Literacy ECHO Series "Grief & Loss During the Holidays"</p> <p>Presenter: Pam Bilusack</p> <p>Welcome to all participants, and introduction of the presenter, and presentation outline. Participants are notified the session is being recorded.</p>
<p>Overview Summary Presentation & Discussion</p>	<p>Presentation Summary</p> <p>Learning Objectives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand and appreciate why grief is amplified during the holidays • Come away with ideas for how to support oneself and/or bereaved communities • Obtain ideas of what a person can do to honour their person <p>Background</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pam started with BC Bereavement Helpline (BCBH) first by facilitating grief support groups, including holiday grief support groups before becoming Executive Director. Have professional experience supporting people grieving • Holiday season may not feel wonderful to many who have experienced a loss. • Every grief experience is different and the holidays can amplify grieving • Pam shared some of her personal losses and how holidays can impact grief so much. She lost her brother 16 years ago to suicide in between Christmas and New Years. First year was a year of shock, recognizing that life will never be the same and how were we to deal with all the firsts • To cope through the firsts after we travelled, escape the holiday ambience which was a great option for us • Holidays never the same for us. I will always grieve loss of traditions, facing new realities, we often don't want reminders around us <p>Grief & Loss During the Holidays...and beyond</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are other types of losses that will affect people during the holidays, not just loss of people and loved ones. Grief is a normal response but can be particularly challenging during holidays.

- From BCBH support groups people have shared that Halloween is particularly challenging as it starts the holiday season and things transform to celebrating Christmas right after and it's all in your sight
- Dread of first holidays without your person. There is no deadline for firsts, feelings can be all over the place and feel very overwhelming
- Grief bursts: triggers can cause strong reactions and emotions (sadness and rage) that can feel to come out of nowhere. Important to have an awareness these things can happen and look at what can I do when/if this happens?
- People may want to isolate in grief and isolate more during the holidays as someone is removed from their family
- Support looks different to everyone
- A focus within BCBH support groups is to understand different grieving styles – within a family member each person will experience the loss differently. One member may express their grief and do a tribute to the person, whereas another family may not. Important to navigate these differences and family to discuss and acknowledge that your feelings are your feelings
- New realities – traditions look different (secondary loss). This varies person to person
- Societal and cultural expectations on what grief process should look like for someone influences them in what they think is right about their about how they should be dealing with the holidays season –those expectations add to the stress a person is already experiencing.
- When forced with making decisions, the seemingly small ones can feel so overwhelming with the extra pressure and external expectations. May want to skip right over the holidays season

Tips to get THROUGH the holidays

- No matter where you are on the grief spectrum it will still continue through the holiday season. There is no way to get over grief and same with the holidays, but we can get through it.
- Tips compiled from BCBH support groups
- Say TENTATIVE – release yourself from expectations and part of setting boundaries for yourself – could be with work, friends or your own self care. Acknowledging all the areas of self to help
- Do you hold on to old traditions or create new? Takes conversations with yourself and others involved to know what's right for you
 - May want to order food in to release pressures
 - Decorate – or help friends decorate so it's not in your face at home
- Unplug from TV, Social Media is big – people sharing best of themselves and this can encourage feelings of loneliness, anger, guilt so may consider removing Apps during this time
- Allow your feelings just as they are, embrace where you are at in the moment if you need to cry, etc
- Travel, escaping. Maybe this is something you do the first year or every year

- Be aware of those negative voices and make assumptions about your grief. Consider skipping those events where those people may be
- Try to embrace moments of fun and laughter, they may be few, and try to stay away of feelings of guilt
- Make your person's favourite meal and donating it
- Challenge yourself if you want to isolate (taking baby steps)
- Have a support system to reach out to (family, friends, support groups, Helpline (BCBH has a line specific during the holidays), counsellor, mentor

Ways to honour your person

- Depending where a person is at in the grieving journey they may or may not want to consider ways to honour their person. Important to look at if this feels right to you. Can be something you do for your person's birthday or over the holidays
- Continuing Bonds is encouraged in our support groups – reliving with the person can be as simple as saying hello to them
- Create a scrapbook of photobook, ways to reconnect with their lives
- Could light a candle, have a spot at the table
- Take turns sharing memories (family or friend group and can learn a lot of interesting things about the person)
- Visit a memorial site if applicable
- Create or buy a decoration
- Watch their favourite movie (doesn't need to be a holiday movie)
- Turn their clothing, blanket and turn into something else you can remember them by
- [BC Bereavement Helpline resources](#)

Poem: **Just Like Grief by Angela Miller**

There are no rules for surviving holiday grief.
Do what you need to do to survive.
Honour your loved one how YOU need to,
and do what feels best for your fragile, aching heart.
You are missing a huge piece of you, so do whatever
you need to do to find a sliver of peace

Questions/discussion

- **Q:** Is the BC Bereavement Helpline available to non-BC residents?
A: Yes, anyone across Canada can call. We get a number of people outside BC and even outside Canada. Our database are only vetted for resources in BC
- **Q:** You mentioned the firsts are usually particularly challenging, what about the seconds, thirds, fourths and tenths and how can people be supportive as most attention I imagine would be given to the firsts
A: Especially with different types of the loss the years can be experienced so differently. With traumatic loss of mine the first was such shock and the second was the most challenging. In general, no timelines for grief. A person may be able to

	<p>celebrate holidays traditions this year but next year it may not be the same for them. Something else may come up and other events may influence their feelings. Be there to support them wherever they are at</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Q: Who are the people on the support telephone line? Lay people or professionals ? A: The BCBH volunteers are trained in grief and loss as well as compassionate listening • Q: Is there any advice or tips that you would give to someone who is supporting someone who is grieving? A: Really acknowledging different grief styles is important. Appreciate what type of griever they are and if they do want to hold it in don't push them. Offer your support however you can, such as making meals and see what will work for them and use that as your guide. May want to take some ideas and share with them, especially if they are experiencing grief fog • Q: I'm always looking for good bereavement holiday activities for children and youth. A: We are not experts with tools for children but activity-based things are great to keep hands busy. (resources mentioned in chat linked below)
<p>Lived experience presenters</p>	<p>Lived experience presenters: Courtney Kindlein, Fiona Lam Courtney & Fiona shared their stories with the death of people close to them and how their grieving experiences have been and some of the tools they have found helpful to support their journeys</p> <p>Courtney:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dad died suddenly Thanksgiving 2021 • First Christmas my mom wanted to find a way to bring him into the celebrations and created a Dad-based trivia game and we got to learn a lot about him. It was a really fun way to have him there. • I chose to ignore my birthday the first year, didn't mention Birthday and I ignored it and snuggled with my dog and watched horror movies because they bring me comfort. • First New Years hit me harder than expected. It was the start of a full year without my dad. To me it was really hard to grapple with but I didn't expect New Years to hit me, Christmas and my birthday I expected would be hard. New Years I had never really cared about. • I found for the firsts do you get a lot of support, people know it's your first and check in. Those important days are still really hard the second, third year and so on. • For us we found a way to reframe holidays to what was important and for us that is spending time together so Thanksgiving we do whatever everyone feels they need. Last year I spent the day with my dad watching Star Wars (that was our thing), I wrote to him and wore his jacket. Christmas we did a food share style and brought something to share rather than isolating people having to cook • Secondary losses: the ways your person was involved in the holidays will be gone. My dad was huge into birthdays and always sent messages. When it was missing it caught me off guard. We talked about in my family and my mom has started doing this now to take over as part of his legacy. Dad always played Santa Christmas morning and handed out the gifts. My one niece has now taken this over and loves

it. My Dad's stuff was the best and now it's missing. I encourage people to take the time to miss these secondary things and grieve them because they can catch you off guard. These types of losses impact us ongoing, it's hard.

Q: Did you have to tell your friends and family what you needed or did they offer and ask what you needed?

A:

- They didn't ask. Most of my friends being young haven't lost a parent and didn't know how to deal with it. I have had conversations with them after and told them how I felt unsupported.
- I tend to isolate with my grief and it was a challenge to tell people what I need. Sometimes it's talking about it and sometimes it's ignoring it and spending time alone. It wasn't until after I started working for BCBH that I began to understand what I was going through and how to communicate it. Takes a lot of internal searching for what you need and recognising that can change moment to moment and being comfortable enough to tell people what you need.
- I'm a big fan of deactivating Facebook when needed

Fiona:

- Lost my dad when 11 years old
- My mom and dad had a pretty fraught relationship for a variety of reasons
- Dad was diagnosed with liver cancer and died within 3 months. We kids were not prepared for that.
- He was in the hospital for a while, came home for Christmas and then a few days later was in a coma and then passed.
- A total shock to us kids and we were in state of disbelief for a long time.
- There wasn't any talk of feelings, not an affectionate family. I didn't know my dad very well as he was working and I was really confused why people were grieving. What were people expecting from me? They seemed to be expecting certain behaviour from me and I didn't understand, I had never experienced a death before.
- Funeral was very difficult and surreal. I couldn't understand a lot of it as it was in Cantonese and all us kids kept in the back and I couldn't see anything.
- I didn't see my dad's body. A surreal, scary experience the whole funeral
- I was in a frozen state going through the motions doing the things I was told. Relatives saying sorry and I wasn't able to take that in. I was experiencing judgement, disapproval and anger from relatives.
- Every Christmas I felt bad not knowing that the last Christmas when my dad came home from the hospital was his last. Ongoing Christmas my mom isolated herself after going through the motions and would be so upset and we as kids didn't want to fake a Christmas spirit.
- Years later we started getting to know our dad through other relatives. Every Father's Day and Christmas to the cemetery and I wrote a poem from my first book.
- Writing poems about my grief were very cathartic. Recommend it to everyone. Poem about visiting cemetery on Father's Day and how unpleasant it was:

**Father's Day (from *Intimate Distances*)
by Fiona Tinwei Lam**

We head out once or twice a year
with durable bouquets
to where the dead have been parked
under name plates, sometimes
by a hedge or a tree.

*Your father can't see
how you've all grown up.*

We can't see him either.
The sky is not heaven,
this earth, no window.

I don't want her memories
of clanging pots, shouting
at a man who looked away.
I've made my own archive--
a few pale frames of a silent man
I wasn't allowed to know.

A few more cars stop nearby
spilling sparse corteges.
Mourners stand like us, limp-armed,
waiting beside gravestones
for a meaning that nudges our corners
but never comes in.

- We went through this ritual which didn't have meaning for me until many years later.
- I was in law school and experiencing stress of law school and saw a counsellor.
- I hadn't been able to cry about my dad since he died over 10 years. And we talked about my dad and that opened the door for me.
- I did not continue law school and switched to writing. I wrote about what I didn't know about him and studied creative writing, publishing some poems and eventually created some of my own meaningful rituals about how to cope with my dad's death. As I processed more I wrote a follow up poem called **Offering** by Fiona Tinwei Lam can be found here -
https://www.asiancha.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=631&Itemid=242
- You can make and adapt your own rituals and that's what I had to do.
- Sometimes it takes a while to open up rituals and emotions and that's ok, that's normal.

Q: What's a lesson learned from going through the journey that you'd like to share with people?

A:

- Every year can be so different.
- Release expectations for yourself and that family and friends may not remember or acknowledge in the same way you do.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As someone who likes to compartmentalize if you need to do that to for the first while to get through just remember to take it out again in whatever way works for you (Art therapy, writing, meditation, counselling – would recommend). Take it out again so you are not prolonging the initial grief too much and then you can start to integrate it. <p>Final reflections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> You will get through the holidays, the tips and ideas from Pam and Courtney are wonderful. I wish I had them when I was younger and I'll be sharing them. This education is so important to spread these resources and ensure people know support like BCBH is here <p>Q: When you have people (particularly youth) they don't like talking about death and we've had a couple losses this year. They want to put on shelf because it's Christmas, any suggestions to navigate that piece of not wanting to change traditions or try rituals?</p> <p>A: Like in an airplane if you need to put on your mask you take care of yourself first and that is applicable here too. With a group of people you will likely not all agree on what is right to do. Working to find a compromise, listening to everyone's perspective. Maybe there is something on a smaller scale you could do first and introduce that. Sometimes it may not work for everyone so are there things you can do individually to honour your person.</p> <p>Q: Any tips for knowing this is a loved one's last Christmas?</p> <p>A: Do what feels right for you. Try to limit feelings of guilt by not doing something. You may want to share words or writing to them. No right or wrong way. Support them and also doing what's right for you.</p>
<p>Session Materials and Additional Resources</p>	<p>Resources shared during the session:</p> <p><u>BC Bereavement Helpline:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally open Monday, Tuesday, Thursday & Friday 9am-5pm; Wednesday 9am-8pm and Saturday 9am-1pm Holiday hours: Dec. 26-29 and Jan. 2-5, 10am-2pm Helpline: 604 -738-9950 or 1-877-779-2223 <p>If you are experiencing grief or loss of any kind we have compassionate volunteers on the other end who are there to listen.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have traumatic loss support groups as well. Have Traumatic loss facilitator training – there's where we give education to grief professionals how someone can implement the 8 week support groups. Have two sessions (January and February). Info on website: <p><u>Supporting children in grief:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> https://dallasshriley.com/2022/04/07/make-time-for-memories/ https://kidsgrief.ca/. Dallas Shriley commented: "A craft for children - cutting out snowflakes and hanging them around the home in your loved one's honour. You can highlight that every single snowflake is different, no two are the same. That is similar to how each of us

	<p>feels when we miss someone. No two people feel grief in the same way, and perhaps year to year your own grief is different.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • https://lumasociety.org/home/ <p>Session Recording is uploaded on the BCCPC’s YouTube page: HERE</p> <p>Dr. Joshua Black’s podcast’s website</p>
<p>Closing</p>	<p>Next ECHO Grief & Bereavement Literacy Series: Thursday, January 25th, 12:00pm - 1:00pm (PST) “Peer Support and Validation for MAiD Specific Grief” Registration link: https://echo.zoom.us/meeting/register/tZUsce-gpzMqGdFole8dF1I78D8mM9BzOaSb</p> <p>Past sessions in this series can be found here.</p> <p>Visit the BCCPC ECHO session website page for upcoming sessions in this series and other series currently running.</p> <p>Subscribe: BC Centre for Palliative Care YouTube page</p> <p>Subscribe: BC Centre for Palliative Care Newsletter</p>