

SA Palliative Care Community Pharmacy Update

A joint initiative of South Australian Palliative Care Services

Expressions of grief can vary widely from person to person and it may be the community pharmacist that recognises a carer's difficulty in coping with the death of a loved one.

Bereavement

It has been about a month since Melinda has died and you notice her bereaved carer Jeffrey in the pharmacy. He's collecting his own medicines and you use the opportunity to ask how he is going. He starts to cry.

Grief is normal

Manifestations of grief can vary widely between people, with reactions ranging in their intensity, duration and expression. Most people benefit from reassurance, acknowledgement of their losses, and access to information, without the need for specialist counselling supports. In fact, support from family and friends may be all that is necessary. Most will switch between a range of emotions from intense sorrow, anxiety, longing, sadness and pre-occupation, with these symptoms gradually settling with time.

Pharmacists may provide support through acknowledging the loss and normalising – without dismissing – their experience.

A small proportion of the bereaved may experience intense distress over a prolonged period of time (greater than 3 months). They may benefit from specialist psychological assistance. It is important that if you have concerns about how they are managing, you confirm what supports are already in place. These concerns may arise because of things they say ("I can't cope anymore") or behaviours that are quite different to their normal routines.

There are a number of written resources available with suggested strategies to manage these conversations (see useful resources).

Recognising people experiencing more severe or prolonged grief reactions is important. Options for support may depend on the individual:

- > If their loved one was registered with a palliative care service, there is likely a bereavement service they can be referred to.
- > If no specialist palliative care service was involved, the bereaved could be offered a mental health plan through their usual GP.

Jeffrey

Jeffrey's reaction is normal and he may need reassurance with or without written information.

The pharmacist's role in bereavement is one of reassurance and information. Advocacy may be necessary at times to ensure they access the right supports.

People with prolonged severe grief may be flagged by the pharmacist and encouraged to discuss the situation with their GP.

Useful resources

- > [The Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement](#)
- > [Bereavement Support Booklet for Residential Aged Care Staff \(193kb pdf\)](#)
- > [Bereavement, palliAGED](#)

For more information

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