

**A hospice counsellors  
perspective**



Dear Friend of Hospice,

My 20 years of work at Heart House Hospice provided me with vast experiences with death and dying. Living through personal losses of close family members created a need for me to reflect deeper on my work as a counsellor. Helping others understand their grief is very different from coping with my own loss. As Shakespeare said in *Much Ado About Nothing*, "Everyone can master grief, but he that has it."

Over 1600 individuals on my caseload have died in the past decade. I was present with some of them when they took their last breath. With every individual, I go through the same mental checklist to ensure that the family had an opportunity to say a final goodbye and explaining what to expect in the last moments.

I watch the family's anguish, their last "I love you" and their last hug. I am very aware of my presence in this emotionally gripping scene. In some ways, it feels strange and out of place, and in other ways, there is a sense of privilege and honour for being able to support the family in this most challenging time. Their death does not surprise me, but for the families experiencing the death of a loved one, no matter how well prepared, it often comes as a shock. No matter how much they expect it, the moment of death is unexpected, just as I did not expect my father to die the day he did seven years ago.

We tend to label denial as a coping strategy or false hope. No matter what it is called, it raises awareness that I need to be mindful of this common reaction, and instead of labelling, I need to guide families to the place of mindfulness so they can be fully present.

As a caregiver and hospice worker, I know that looking after someone dying can be emotionally draining and physically exhausting, leading to burnout and complicated grief. Yet, it is not uncommon to see families dealing with death in isolation. There are many reasons why people feel all alone when dealing with the end of life. It could be that they are new to the country, they have no family or friends. Our cultural background often dictates how, when and whom to ask for help. Some think they can do it on their own. Others feel ashamed to ask for help or do not want to bother anyone. Some consider asking for help as a sign of weakness. Perhaps they don't want others to see their loved one's changing physical appearance and diminishing cognitive abilities. Others do not know whom to ask, and then there are some that avoid acknowledging grief and death. The complexity of the system can often leave gaps that a caregiver is compelled to mitigate.

As I watched my father dying and reflected on my support system later on, I realized that I could check off so many boxes preventing me from asking for help. Yet, through my work, I understand the importance and benefits of including other people in the circle of care. I chose to be the lonely caregiver for eight years. This experience taught me that doing it alone is not a heroic mission but a road leading to burnout.

I realized that in addition to sharing the care and easing my responsibilities, it was also about the opportunity as a caregiver, to share the stories of who my father was and show that his shriveled and bony body housed a man who was still a loved husband, father and grandfather. He was once a man of such strong will and creative abilities but is now seen as incapacitated—a man with his own story. I now try to encourage families I work with to share their stories, which can help create meaning and resilience. An article by Gunaratnam and Oliviere (2014) talks about the importance of including the caregivers and hear their stories. "Caregivers have stories too, and voicing these stories helps them more fully understand, experience, and deliver care to those who are sick" (p. 2). Sharing validates our experiences. Storytelling requires a teller and a listener, an interaction that impedes isolation. Hospice counsellors are the listeners, and so are our volunteers. We want you to be the teller. We want to hear your stories and honour you and your loved ones.

**HOSPICE IS ABOUT MAKING  
THE MOST OF EVERY  
MOMENT.**

"Losing your partner is the hardest thing, but with the help I'm receiving from Heart House Hospice, I am learning to be at peace with the inevitability and unpredictability of life."

*Bereavement Program Participant*

"The molds we made are now priceless treasures in our home. When I'm missing Benny so much, I hold his little hand mold and it's the closest to making me feel my baby in my arms."

*Caregiver and Legacy Work Participant*

"I really appreciate the visits from you and the peace of mind that comes with your promise to continue to support my mom after I die."

*Palliative Individual*

"Thank you for all you have done for my daughter. She is playing with her friends again and she doesn't stand alone by the wall at recess. She is no longer afraid to visit the cemetery and talks about her Daddy all the time."

*Parent of a child in our HUUG Program (Help us Understand Grief)*

The clinical approach is not enough to create a holistic care plan. I am more mindful of needing to create space and time to hear clients' and caregivers' stories, incorporating them into their care plans and our future discussions rather than hearing them at the client's funeral.

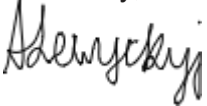
My work at the hospice and daily exposure to death do not protect me from grief, but it teaches me the importance of being thankful for every day and being present with the people I serve and my own family.

Reflecting on my own experiences, the message is clear: death is a part of the life cycle, but how we approach it makes a difference in how we work through our grief moving forward. The topic of death deserves attention just like any other. Behind every face we encounter while working with those dying and those caring for them is a person with a life, a story deserving to be heard, honoured, valued and retold.

Working as a hospice counsellor at Heart House Hospice is an honour and privilege among the professionals, colleagues, and volunteers who are ready to support families like mine and yours. This is more than a job to me. It enriches my life. It shows me what truly matters. My personal and professional experiences highlight that looking after a loved one who is dying can often feel unbearable. We are filled with all kinds of emotions: exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. However, having someone who can guide us, validate our feelings, provide information, and untangle the complexity of the healthcare system is what hospice counsellors do every day. Therefore, I am sharing my story to let you know that you do not have to be alone, and we need each other to help us work through our grief and the many challenges facing the end of life.

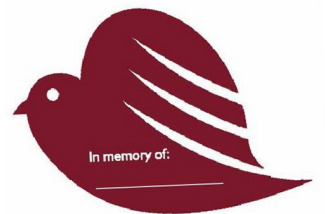
We can only do this humbling work because of generous people like YOU. Unfortunately, Heart House Hospice is not fully funded like other large institutions. The organization is only government funded by 48%; we rely on our community and people like you for the additional 52%. Your support means that the professional and compassionate team at Heart House Hospice can deliver on our promise to ensure that our people live their final days with grace and dignity. Your support touches the lives of many in our community from the time of diagnosis throughout the illness trajectory, including after death support. We can only provide these services at no cost because of your support. Every donation matters, please donate today.

Sincerely,



Anna Lewyckyj

**P.S. Heart House Hospice has a new way to honour your loved ones; a virtual Memorial Dove Wall on our website. Click on Memorial Wall for further details.**



**DONATE NOW**

**MEMORIAL WALL**