

Hospice offers support groups for community members in need

By **Rob Paul, Local Journalism Initiative Reporter**

Death can be difficult to grasp and the emotions that come through dealing with it can be tough for many to get through. The grieving process is immense, especially when going through it alone.

To help people in the community who are dealing with death, Bethell Hospice has been running support groups for over a year. These groups allow them to counsel those in need while providing individuals with a community setting to connect with others who have been going through similar situations.

The adult grief support group currently being offered is a weekly session that is part of a series of programs run by Bethell Hospice free of charge and will continue to run in five-week stints throughout the year.

"We also offer one-on-one supportive counselling, art therapy programs for adults, youth, and children, music therapy, therapeutic touch, and a wellness sampler series, to name a few," says Natalie Talma, Community Program Lead at Bethell Hospice. "Thanks to the generosity of our donors, there is no cost to participate in this, or any other program offered at Bethell Hospice. While Bethell Hospice has always had an active community program, demand has grown steadily, and there is a clear need for these sorts of programs to serve our community. Each adult grief support group sessions runs over a five-week period and is offered several times throughout the year."

Bethell Hospice found it was necessary to implement the adult grief programs, as well as others, for those in the community who might not have the benefit of support around them when they need it most, and not having that support can lead to both short and long-term impacts.

"Death is something that will impact everyone at some point in their lives," Talma said. "Grieving the death of a loved one is also something that will impact everyone at some point in their lives. Grief can be debilitating for some people. It can impact our ability to function on a daily basis due to the intensity of emotion often associated with the death of a loved one. It can impact our lives in many different ways. For some, grief might present with physical symptoms such as headaches, loss of appetite, or insomnia.

"Others might experience difficulty concentrating or the inability to multi-task, others may withdraw socially. Regardless of how grief presents itself, it can be challenging to cope. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, individuals have been less able to participate in usual grief rituals that aid in healing, such as funerals and celebrations of life. Social isolation has also led to increased anxiety and depression for some people, and for those grieving, it can be particularly challenging to cope."

One of the most important factors in providing these types of grieving support services for Bethell Hospice is ensuring that every individual has access to them.

"Bethell Hospice is proud to be among the very limited number of organizations which provide free supportive programming to bereaved individuals in our community," said Talma. "We strive to eliminate barriers to accessing services, so not only are programs provided at no cost to the individuals, but our clinicians can serve clients via phone or videoconference, removing any barriers with transportation."

Each group ranges from five to 10 individuals and is facilitated by one of Bethell Hospice's experienced clinicians and they encourage anyone who needs support in grieving to reach out.

"Our adult grief support group provides a safe and non-judgmental space for participants to explore and share their thoughts and feelings, in order to remember the past, redefine the present, and recreate the future. This is the essence of healing through bereavement. It's open to any adult grieving the death of any one loved one—for example, death of a parent, child, sibling, or friend.

It's a five-week support group which runs for an hour and a half once a week via Zoom. Once COVID protocols can be relaxed, we hope to resume offering this group in person.?

Providing these support systems in a group setting is key because it allows those grieving to know they are far from alone and to truly talk out what they're going through with others who understand their grief.

?Grief support groups are valuable to many individuals grieving the loss of a loved one,? she said. ?Our professional facilitator discusses the grief process and works to support participants to understand their own experience and learn to cope in a healthy way. Different from one-on-one counselling, support groups encourage participants to identify with one another, and use their shared experience as a healing tool. It can help individuals to understand their grief response, it creates a sense of community, interactions may mitigate feelings of loneliness and isolation as well as anxiety and depression. The format also encourages the development and use of valuable peer support, group sessions on grief also provide suggestions for healthy coping strategies.?

Though still relatively new, Talma and Bethell Hospice have been able to reach many people in need through these group sessions and hope to continue to reach everybody who needs a hand during tough times.

?Since January 2020, the adult grief support groups at Bethell Hospice have served countless clients,? Talma said. ?Our team of clinicians and volunteers have conducted 250 group sessions, totalling nearly 400 hours of direct client support. We have the capacity to support even more grieving individuals in our community and will rise to meet the need. Our goal is to make sure that anyone who wants support has access to it through Bethell Hospice. No one has to grieve alone if they don't want to. We hope that anyone who is reading this article and feels they may benefit from bereavement support will contact us?we are here to help.?

For more information on the adult grief support group, other bereavement supports and services with Bethell Hospice, and to become a client, contact Bethell Hospice. Individuals can self-refer by completing the referral form on our website at bethellhospice.org/community-program-referral-form/ or by contacting Team Lead Natalie Talma at 905-452-4979 or ntalma@bethellhospice.org.