

RADIO BROADCAST – NEWSRADIO 938 - FEATURE

31/03/05 child bereavement / feature

Most of us have lost someone close to us at some point in our lives.

But the loss of a child is one that few people know how to handle.

Shobana Kesava finds out what is needed and what's being done in Singapore to make life a little better for those left behind.

Title: 31/03 child bereavement feature

In: "Think about loss and ...

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Think about loss and what comes to mind are a host of memories.

While the loss of a friend or a parent creates a longing for the past, the loss of a child throws up countless thoughts of what could have been.

I spoke with Jenni Thomas, founder of the Child Bereavement Trust in the UK, who explained the special case of the bereaved parent.

because most of us when we have children we plan the rest of our lives with our children. we think when you lose a child you lose your future. You plan all the parties maybe even the weddings, you think about all of that when you have children. when they die, you lose all of that. You lose everything that was going to be.

For this reason, Jenni - herself a former nurse turned counsellor - told me that it is necessary for parents to get adequate support to grieve completely.

I think what health professionals need to learn is that they can't make it better. but it helps if you are alongside the people in their pain. You don't try to make it less you don't try and make it better you just say I'm so sorry, and can i tell you about some things you may not have thought about in all this terrible shock and trauma? Other parents have told me this is what they needed maybe you'd like to do that. And if they don't that's fine, but if the health professionals don't offer that to the parents, parents who are completely shocked and devastated won't think of all those things. Then when they go home they have regrets. They think not only did my child die, i wasnt even a very good parent. I didn't do anything for him after he died. I just left him there. Sometimes parents think they don't want a photograph but in the months ahead, they will need a photograph. Because they think if i don't see my child i'll be all right. But most people can't get it out of their mind.

In Singapore, about 550 children die each year of various complications.

Some of the cases happen quite suddenly.

For Valerie Lee's two-year-old, Ning, a seemingly innocent cold turned out to be a viral infection that took her life in a matter of hours, five years ago.

i knew that the doctors and the nurses were very very sad and they didn't know how to express it to us. That evening just before midnight, a police officer came to call on us to find out what happened because it was unnatural death and they had to ask us questions and look at the medication that she took at home etc etc. that young police officer was also very uncomfortable. He didn't know what to say and he said i know its a very bad time as he was interviewing us and we were showing the medication, we could hear from the neighbours shouting happy new year and it was just unbelievable

Patrick Wong lost his son 5 years ago as well.

Lucas lived for just 8 days.

he was born and straight into ICU with too many tubes that i want to remember. The care they gave him, They were tremendous and the briefings and updates they gave us that was all fine but one thing i think was missing although at that time you go through so many things you don't think about it was someone to sit you down and say ok what are you feeling Ok this is normal So most of the crying was done in private between my wife and i and there wasn't someone who could really understand in terms of a counsellor... maybe we didn't ask for one

Parents can now reach out more easily for help in dealing with their grief.

Child Bereavement Support Singapore has been set up here, thanks to the efforts of Dr Lim Sok Bee, Senior consultant and head of neonatology department at the KK Women's and Children's Hospital.

I've always seen parents in pain, with no formalised organised support and this is something i've really wanted to do . From that' i've always been looking out for some expertise to help us and for many years i looked and couldn't find any until the opportunity to meet Jenni Thomas, and that was the impetus we really needed here in Singapore and in one year so much has been done.

This local support group was started by five bereaved parents.

They promise to lend support to parents who've lost a child whether through miscarriage, still birth, infancy or later in life.

Although they aren't trained counsellors, the group's president, Sonya Szpojnarowicz says this will be a huge relief to the bereaved.

the value of parent to parent support is absolutely enormous. It's the knowledge that somebody else has been in the same boat you're in. That you're not alone. We're not professional counsellors but what we are doing is compiling our own recommendations, advice, resources so that between us we have personal recommendations of counsellors in Singapore or other resources that bereaved parents might need.

And access to professional counsellors is on the way.

Child Bereavement Support Singapore is tying up with other organisations to provide smoother channels of professional help.

Dr Gerard Chuah of the NKF's Children's Medical Fund says it will offer scholarships to those in the healthcare sector.

There isn't really such paramedical staff to help parents where they've lost a child. we are working with the KK hospital. we're gonna give two scholarships. We're will actually help them find attachments in the UK and the USA...the para medical staff when they return, they can train healthcare professionals to provide such an infrastructure where these parents can receive holistic support and get over this period of bereavement.

For now, if you'd like information on how you can help yourself, or someone you care about deal better with a child's death, there's a book available called Farewell My Child.

Details on the book and the support group can be found at the website www.childbereavementsupport.org.sg

I'm Shobana Kesava for Newsradio 938.

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