

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE, GRIEF AND CHRISTMAS WISDOM

How did I end up here, working in health with amazing, knowledgeable, resilient people and learning something new every day? I ask myself that question regularly and truth be told, my younger self never imagined I'd be working in health, let alone in Palliative Care where I commenced my role with the GRPCT in October 2022. You see, way back last century when I was at school, I was a science / maths student all the way. That love continued through to university because to me, science and maths were predictable and dependable. They suited my enquiring, methodical, organised, rule governed brain perfectly. It was true love of the intellectual kind, or so I thought. Then came the wilderness years, or so I like to call them. The paucity of opportunity in the Australian science / tech industry saw many of my cohort either head into teaching, head back to Uni, or head overseas to travel and / or pursue employment.

Working but not really fulfilled, a friend and I were putting the world to rights one night over Milo and watching Neighbours, wondering what to do to get ourselves out of our respective ruts. To cut a long story short – my friend decided that they too would head overseas, while that night I decided to pivot, adapt, reflect and to head back to Uni as a mature age student, at the ripe old age of twenty four, to retrain in the 'pseudo-science' of Psychology & Welfare.

Fast forward to 2022 and I've been working in the field of psychology for twenty two years. I often have people say to me when they hear how I progressed into psychology, "But people can be so unpredictable, unreliable, disorganised and they often don't follow the rules!" To which I reply, "True and they can also be many other things, it's what makes my job so interesting, challenging and there is always something to learn."

One aspect of training in clinical psychology requires that we are able to learn and reflect upon how who we are as an individual can impact upon those we work with, both clients and other professionals, and what we bring to those relationships. Can psychologists read your mind and are we psychoanalysing every interaction we have? No, we can't and mostly we're not, however we can provide a formulation to help create a broader picture of understanding about human behaviour and emotions, amongst other things.

Being asked by Stacey to write something for the newsletter has provided me with an opportunity to stop, reflect, take my own advice and provide a gentle reminder to myself and to you about why, as we approach the end of 2022, we may be feeling exhausted or stressed. "I'm exhausted and a bit cranky!" Well, that's what my inside voice has been saying when I've been greeted with, "Hi Tan, how are you?" for at least the last 4 months. My outside voice replies, "Good thanks, how are you?" Has anyone else noticed they've been doing the same or something similar?

The following is my formulation on the impact of the last 3 years. No one I know, myself included, began 2022 on a full tank. The previous two years had been a sustained onslaught due to bushfires, COVID and floods to our sense of safety, health, how we functioned as a society and how we performed our jobs. By the end of 2021 most of us had dragged ourselves across the finish line feeling worn out, shell shocked, frazzled and squeezing every bit of oomph we could out of the adrenaline we'd been running on.

We entered 2022 with some trepidation and carrying the repercussions of a surreal two years which included grief, shock, disbelief, anger and trauma. For most, the lifting of restrictions post-COVID has meant we have spent the last year, consciously and unconsciously, trying to 'catch up.' With this has come more pressure and stress across all domains of our lives – work, school, relationships, sport and family. We've all missed out on so much, we don't want to miss out on any more.

Perhaps the need to play 'catch up' has enabled us to be distracted in the hope it will be easier to forget or wipe away the injuries left behind. Unfortunately that's not possible. An attempt to create some semblance of a new 'normal' while disregarding that for almost two years our sympathetic nervous systems were operating in overdrive has left our mental, physical, spiritual and emotional health depleted.

Yet despite this, we have shown our ability to pivot, adapt, be creative, to flex, accommodate, innovate, (insert your own buzz word here...), and demonstrated herculean levels of resilience in order to continue to deliver services and care to those who need it. The toll for all this however has been exhaustion and stress.

So before you begin to question or admonish your depleted, exhausted or stressed self – stop, take a step back, reflect and remind yourself of what you and others have been through and overcome. Show yourself and others compassion and kindness, go slowly and allow yourself to recover.

Christmas is nearly upon us and can come with its own expectations, demands and stressors. It can be a time of mixed emotions or grief, with that in mind the following may be helpful for you or someone you know:

- It's ok to be sad. Sadness is part of the human experience. Trying to cheer someone up or telling them they should not be sad only tells them that they cannot be honest about how they are feeling.
- Let the grieving person lead. Ask them how they are feeling about the holidays if you are concerned about them being alone. For some, being alone may be their preference, for others an invitation may be welcomed.
- Criticism is unhelpful – there is no 'right way' to do the holidays. Unsolicited advice, e.g. "You should to put up some decorations to make things more cheerful" or criticising how someone is handling the holidays, "You shouldn't be upset / alone at this time of year" feels disrespectful to a grieving person.
- You can't make things 'better' so don't try to. Learning to sit with discomfort and tolerating not being able to 'fix things' enables us and others to learn to cope with and survive uncomfortable situations and emotions.
- Share memories and reminisce where appropriate. Trying to navigate your way around a gaping hole in someone's life is rarely helpful. Telling stories, sharing memories, using their name, etc. is a way of connecting and acknowledging the loss.
- Invite the grieving person to gatherings / events but don't pressure them to attend. Also accept that they may cancel at the last minute, leave early or decline the invitation – don't take it personally.
- Grief is not a linear process and does not occur on a time scale. There is no defined start and end time and grief does not only occur when there is a death. Anticipatory grief can occur when someone is facing a death of a person or pet, a change in or loss of residence, loss of possessions, etc.

To finish, one of my favourite sayings comes from the movie *The Best Marigold Hotel* – "It takes team work to make a dream work." I look forward to developing the role of psychology in the GRPCT, to teamwork and further learning.

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