In prison, there's no place to grieve

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Being incarcerated makes it uniquely difficult to process loss or offer support to your loved ones during difficult times. In prison, there is no space to grieve. We're surrounded by people who reject and exploit signs of weakness. Reluctant to burden our loved ones, we often cope by compartmentalizing our emotions. There is a feeling of powerlessness, too, knowing that we couldn't be there and can offer little more than a phone call and some words of consolation.[1]

GRIEF IS INDISPUTABLY A NATURAL HUMAN EMOTION, and bereavement and mourning an important if not vital process towards recovery from a death. Like so many issues regarding the health and well-being of prison inmates, little attention or thought is given to the experience of loss and separation when someone close to them has died, whether it be a fellow inmate, a member of his or her "prison family" or, "on the outside," a family member or loved one. The ripple effect of the grieving process, more often than not, is overlooked in the prison environment. As an example, little consideration is given correctional staff who may have established a relationship with a prison inmate, not unheard of with those serving long-term sentences.

In palliative care circles one often hears of the "work of grieving." Under normal circumstances, that is, outside the prison environment, it can be a complicated and extended process, one affected by many influences. The capacity to grieve is a skill to be learned and acquired. It isn't instinctual, like a sense of rhythm. And, there's no predictable pattern as to how a person should grieve or for how long. How a person expresses grief, or behaves at the death of someone close to them, is a direct reflection of their cultural roots, age and gender, upbringing and education, faith, personal beliefs and values – and, perhaps most importantly, their relationship with the deceased. And, expressions of grief don't necessarily occur only after a death. Many people experience emotions in expectation of a death. For others, the work of grieving may not begin until *long after* death.

Grief and "recovery" is a "journey" of emotional peaks and valleys. However grief ultimately manifests its self, its effects can be profound. Doubly so in the confines of a prison. Prison for the inmates is home, for correctional staff a workplace. The former lives in enforced solitude, with a lack of privacy, the latter works in an environment focussed primarily on logistics and security. Neither conducive to the "work of grieving."

The voices of bereaved inmates is perhaps best heard through the pages of prison news sources, for example:

> *For those of us with long sentences, mourning a loved one often begins years earlier. For people with lengthy sentences, it is inevitable that we will face the loss of a family member or friend on the outside. Many of us already feel as though we have had everyone taken away. When we are notified of a death, it is like we are finally receiving closure for what we have been preemptively mourning our entire sentence. When I learned of my father's passing, years of hurt, blame and confusion melted away. The trauma and dysfunction of those years barely even mattered. There was only sorrow left in me, sorrow for the disconnect created and deepened by pride and anger. What a waste resentment is.*[2]

> *My father's funeral was to be held on the third Saturday in June... My environment doesn't allow me the proper space to grieve, so I had to find moments in which I could grab some solitude and process my thoughts and feelings in the days leading up to the funeral. I found myself staying up until the wee hours of the night to be alone with my pain. It hurt I couldn't be there on the day my father was sent home. Not being able to see my mother or my father off will be a pain that I will carry until my day comes. During the hours of the service, I decided to spend the time walking on the track in the recreational yard and listening to music.*[3]

> *The only bloke on God's green earth I knew to be in prison just so happened to be holding out his hand in support when I landed in the hospital at Port Phillip Prison almost two years ago. Paris was in a cell awaiting transport for eye surgery. I was crippled and confused, fresh off a traumatic incident from hell. Paris was calm, kind and compassionate – exactly what I needed in a place full of... well, criminals. What are the chances – not only was he in the prison hospital at the same time but he was in the cell right next door? Due to my disability, I was stuck there longer, while Paris slipped in and out for treatments. Then this year, they found cancer. It hit him hard – and fast. Despite the pain, he stayed a gentleman. Kept his vibe high. When he didn't return from St Vincent's, the nurses told us the truth: it was much worse than he'd let on. He was in for the fight of his life.*[4]

A number of prisons, notably in the U.S., have adopted the concept of peer caregiving, in some cases in partnership with community resources, to provide hospice for inmates living with a terminal illness, which includes grief counselling and bereavement support. Little is known, however, on the impact of caring for dying inmates on the hospice inmate volunteers themselves:

> *It's a part of you gone. It hurt so bad, all you can do is cry. You don't care who see you cry. One time, I mean I felt like if you cry too, it's weak. You know, men don't cry. But as I begin in this program, it make no difference who see me cry. I feel for that person when they leave, but I know one day I did everything I could for him, and he know I was right there with them. He wasn't by himself.*[5]

> *It's a fact that it is a part of life. The hard part comes in is when you do, like you said, building those relationships with guys, factoring on that relationship, only to watch them die. You know, it's difficult, but I just kind of – I don't know. I just give them my all to that patient, to that process, and when it's over, it's over. I'm really right back on to the other patients.*[5]

> *When a patient die on me, I say, "I can't handle it no more." But go back to the patient. I know that other people need me, just like he did. If I was there for him, I could be there for [someone else]. And that will motivate you. That will keep you going, that you know somebody else needs you. You can't stop now. And I refuse to stop now.*[5]

Grief support groups are common place in the "outside world," far less so in prisons. Where a hospice program does exist, however, volunteers invariable support fellow inmates who are grieving.

The on-the-job demands and stresses placed on correctional staff is well documented in the literature, but the emotional impact in the case of a prison inmate dying from "natural causes" is scarce. Most research to date has focused on the impact of deaths by suicide and cases of drug overdoses, both common occurrences.

Sensitizing correctional staff to the experience of inmates working through *their* grief has attracted a measured degree of interest within palliative care and hospice circles; for example, three community hospices in the U.K. have successfully partnered with local prisons to train correctional staff in this regard.[6,7,8]

What prison inmates experience is categorized as "disenfranchised" grief, grief that goes unacknowledged for the most part. Needed is a thoughtful "re-think" of current policies and practices.

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