

5.3 Life Stories Loss and Grief

What	Loss and Grief
Purpose	improve awareness of the impact of loss and bereavement, including the loss of a same sex partner on the person
Target group	teachers and trainers in vocational education and their students
Level	Level 2-3-4 in vocational education.
Execution	Extra support from the teacher might be necessary depending on the ability of the students to work independently
Sources	Case studies at end of the unit; UTube videos <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Disenfranchised Grief with Dr. Ken Doka 2) Disenfranchised Grief & LGBT Seniors; Information leaflets i) Coping with the death of your same-sex partner 3) Supporting LGBT+ people around bereavement

Loss and grief is a significant part of all our lives, however many LGBT+ older people have experienced multiple losses in their lives. In many cases this generation of LGBT+ older people experienced the grief of loss of biological family (parents, siblings, grandparents), friends and community when they revealed their sexual orientation. In addition to the loss and grief associated with the coming out process, this age group are also survivors of the AIDS epidemic, with many having witnessed friends die. As they age they are also experiencing the death of partners. While the death of a loved one is one of the most difficult and emotional times for any person, for people in same sex relationships their grief is often exacerbated as their loss and pain may go unrecognised and unacknowledged. Bereaved heterosexual people, frequently, have family members and friends willing to support them during the mourning period. In addition, the institution of marriage yields certain guarantees in terms of financial security and leave entitlements. It also allows the surviving partner to publicly display their grief and entitles them to access support and comfort from religious organisations, health care professionals, and conventional bereavement support groups. Their involvement in caring activities and funeral arrangements is also automatically assumed and gives them the opportunity to say goodbye in a public, formalised manner. In contrast many LGBT people experience what has been described as ‘disenfranchised grief’. Doka (1989) explains the concept of ‘disenfranchised grief’ as occurring when the relationship is not recognised, the loss is not recognised and the griever is not recognised.

Activity 1

Read Sam, Jamile’s and Michele’s stories of loss, located at the end of this unit

Activity 2

How might the following experiences impact on Sam, Jamile’s and Michele’s ability to accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain and all the emotions associated with grief, and adjust to life without the person?

- Person not being out to work colleagues
- Person not being out to family and friends
- People not recognising the love that exists within same sex relationships
- Person not being able to attend a funeral or publically mourn their loss

Activity 3

Listen to [Ken Doka talk](#) and this [LGBT Elders](#) talk on disenfranchised grief and discuss in a group what is meant by disenfranchised grief.

Activity 4

Identify how might Sam, Jamile’s and Michele’s experiences correspond to the following elements of disenfranchised grief. i) the loss is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, ii) the loss is not socially sanctioned and iii) the loss cannot be publicly mourned.

Activity 5

In your country or service, what supports are available to support a person whose same sex partner dies? Locate any information that your community has on grief and loss and review it to see if it is written in a manner that is sensitive to same sex grief. If not, what changes would you make?

Activity 6

Read the information leaflets in [link one](#) and [link two](#) and in groups consider how you might use this information to support people whose same sex partner is dying or has died.

Keep on learning

- Bristowe K, Marshall S, Harding R. The bereavement experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or trans* people who have lost a partner: A systematic review, thematic synthesis and modelling of the literature. *Palliat Med.* 2016;30(8):730–744. doi:10.1177/0269216316634601
- Doka, K.(1989) *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognising Hidden Sorrow* New York: Lexington Books
- Glacken M. and Higgins A. (2008) The grief experience of same sex couples within an Irish context: Tacit acknowledgement. *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* **14**(6), 297-
- Piatczany S, Bennett K, Soulsby L. “We Were in a Partnership That Wasn’t Recognized by Anyone Else”: Examining the Effects of Male Gay Partner Bereavement, Masculinity, and Identity Men and Masculinities 1097184X15583905, first published on November 27, 2015 as doi:10.1177/1097184X15583905 [link](#)
- Kamen C, Mustian K, Johnson MO, Boehmer U. Same-sex couples matter in cancer care. *J Oncol Pract.* 2015;11(2):e212–e215. doi:10.1200/JOP.2014.000877

Sam’s story

My name is Sam, and my partner Richard died from a heart condition in our local hospital. Although some of my work colleagues were aware that I was in a same sex relationship, as I didn’t talk about it in work none of my colleagues were at his funeral. When he died I took one week’s annual leave from work as I didn’t want to ask for bereavement leave. When I returned to work my work colleagues clearly didn’t know what to say to me so they avoided saying anything. As I was finding it hard to cope with the overwhelming loss and grief I was experiencing, a friend who worked in the hospital where he died gave me a leaflet about a bereavement support group that had started within the hospital and advised me to attend. About three months after Richard’s death I picked up the courage to attend. When I arrived everyone was very welcoming, some people knew each other and others were new. Once we sat down one man spoke about the emotional impact the death of his wife had on him. He was very upset, so I listened with deep empathy, feeling I could connect with his pain and loss as he had also experienced the death of his life partner. After this man spoke I empathised with him and he asked me about my circumstance and who had died in my family, so I talked about the death of Richard, talking about how long we had been together, how much I missed being with him and my deep sense of pain at knowing that he will never walk into our home again; we were together for over 20 years. When I had finished speaking another member of the group turned to him to express his sympathy saying “I am sorry to hear that you lost a friend, a loss of a friend is hard but the death of a wife is so much harder’. That response although well-meaning made me feel so alone.

Jamile’s story

My name is Jamile, I grew up in a very conservative home and community. While I always felt I was somewhat different from my female friends, I didn’t know what it was. When I was 24 years old I married Sonie who was 8 years older than me. I knew him well as we grew up together. I am not sure why I married him, I liked him but wasn’t in love with him. I suppose it was subtle pressure from family, friends and wider community, as back then there was an expectation that all women marry and have children. We had three children together, who are all in their early forties now and married with their own children. My husband was always very loving and a great provider, so we certainly had a good family life and I experienced many happy times with the children and him. As I aged I began to realise that I was attracted to other women, which initially frightened and upset me. I tried to put any thoughts and feeling I had about my sexual orientation out of my head. However as time went on I found it increasingly difficult and during my 40’s I experienced three serious episodes of depression and on one occasion attempted to end my life. After spending time attending a mental health service and therapist, to preserve my mental health, soon after my 50th birthday, I decide to leave the family home and marriage. I moved out and moved into my own apartment a few miles away. Two years later I met Anne through an online group and we started a relationship. It was the first time in my life that I understood what it was to be in love, and what being loved unconditionally meant and felt like. While Anne lived in another country we saw each other frequently and she visited me. After 4 wonderful years she was diagnosed with cancer and died within three months of the diagnosis. Although my children met her they were unaware of the nature of our relationship as I

have never told my husband, children or my family the real reason the marriage broke up. They automatically assumed that Anne and I were just friends, so I could never talk to them or anybody about what I was going through. I did attend the funeral but as Anne was in a similar circumstances to myself, her family didn't know about me so they thought I was 'just a friend'. I sat at the back in the small crematorium, holding back tears, with my heart breaking. I wanted to shout out she was my lover and not my just a 'friend', but I kept silent.

Michele's story

My name is Michele and I am a transgender woman. When I was 18 I married Catherine and we had two sons together. I consider myself a very good 'dad' to my children and I worked hard to provide for them. I suppose, I always knew that I was different. From an early age I felt I was in the wrong body, but saying something like that to my parents wasn't an option. To be honest I didn't have the language to describe what I was feeling or thinking and didn't know my-self what the issue was until I was 23 years old. When I was 23, I saw a television programme on transgender issues and it was only then that I began to recognise myself in the stories told. While I was relieved, I was also upset and decided not to speak about it to anyone. Firstly, my children were small and I knew that my wife would reject me and ask me to leave the home. So I didn't want to lose contact with my sons, I also feared losing my job. I did experiment with dressing as a woman, when I travelled abroad on my own with work. By the time I was 30 I was finding it increasingly difficult to cope and stated making contact with the transgender community. They supported me and helped me to come out to my wife and children. While my wife was upset and angry and our marriage broke up, she was supportive in allowing me to have contact with my sons. However, contact was always on the proviso that I call myself Michael, identify as their 'dad' and dress in male clothes, which I did until the youngest was 18 years old. In contrast my own biological family rejected me completely. My father was so angry that he warned me never to visit the family home or local community again, which I respected. When I got a letter from my mother, a year after telling her and Dad, she and I arranged a monthly phone call that was kept secret, as we both knew that if it became known, my father and siblings would be annoyed and angry with her. While my mother was 75 years old she was in very good health, she died suddenly from a heart attack when I was 50 years old. I wasn't told about it until after the funeral. I only heard through a school friend who wrote to my ex-wife asking her to tell me. It is hard for me to come to terms with her death as I never got to say goodbye or ask any questions about her death or funeral. I don't even know where in the graveyard she in buried and can't visit in case my family find out.