

Cope with death and dying: Wisdom from the workforce



As part of developing the Self-Care Room, we talked to many different people in aged care. They shared their thoughts about what happens to people working in aged care where death is a part of care. These are some of the important points they wanted to share.

Acknowledge that when someone dies it affects you

"I think what made it worse was when her breathing got very shallow, and I knew she was coming to the end. I did go out. I told her I was going out for a minute. I went out and I had a cry because I wish that I could have saved her, but I knew that I couldn't." (PCW, RAC)

"I know I cry over some of them that die because I sit with them. You spend time with them and you love them." (PCW, RAC)

"I was sad. But I was also happy that she wasn't suffering anymore." (PCW, RAC)

Recognise your care was important

"Her family couldn't be with her towards the end of her life. I was with her. I'd spend as much time as I could with her. I'd sit there and I'd tell her that I was there." (PCW, RAC)

"If I am there when they do go, I'm usually holding their hand, or talking to them." (PCW, RAC)

"I take a lot of pride in making them comfortable." (PCW, RAC)

"I like to take a trolley into the person's room, we've got the mouth swabs on it, so we can keep them moist and that stops from drying out. I have creams, and I've got a music player. And I usually put on their favourite music, or I'll do the things that they wanted for their end of care if it's requested." (PCW, RAC)

Say goodbye

"I gave her a kiss on the forehead, and I said goodbye to her. I felt like, even though she died, she knew that she was treated with dignity." (PCW, RAC)

"Because I try and build a relationship with the people I look after, when they're palliative and they're at the end of their life, shedding some tears for them is a way for me of saying I loved her or him and I'm going to miss them." (PCW, RAC)

Take a moment for yourself

"I take a short moment to be able to just let that settle in my mind, react, respond appropriately and then take some time afterwards if that affects me deeper." (Pastoral carer)

"Sometimes I have a good cry. Like with Doris when she passed, I was strong for everyone. But then I went into the nurses' room had my cry or I go outside and take a coffee and sit there and have a chat with hubby on the phone or just sit there and have a cry and just think about it. And think of the memories that I have with those persons." (PCW, RAC)

Talk about how you feel

"I've got my partner that I'm able to talk to about it. He can empathise. He doesn't understand it, but sometimes you just need to offload it in some way." (Home care worker)

"If it had been a death that had some element of trauma, we get the people on shift together and just have a debrief and generally that's when we start talking." (Manager, RAC)

"We both sat down afterwards, and we had a chat about it. At first, I said, 'Well, I feel embarrassed that I was crying,' and she said, 'Don't ever feel embarrassed about crying,' she said, 'because it showed that you cared for her.' Yeah, it made me feel good knowing that I could talk to her." (PCW, RAC)

You become more familiar with death and dying

"I think with time and experience, how I feel is a little bit robotic. Because you've had to become that way to manage. It's still difficult when somebody passes away, but you're more of a support for the staff that aren't coping with it." (Manager, RAC)

"Remembering, this is the life cycle. This is a part of everything that we experience in life, so all I can do is be there to support them. Whether that is in absolute silence or whether that is putting on their favourite music or picking up flowers from the garden and putting them in the room because that's what they liked. So, honouring them." (Pastoral carer)

"I've learned to, every subsequent death, manage a little differently." (PCW, RAC)

Looking for more resources to help you cope with death and dying? Visit the Self-Care Room on the ELDAC website.