

## WHEN THE GRIEVER IS INCARCERATED

Ginette G. Ferszt PhD, RN, CS, CT and Phyllis B. Taylor BA, RN, CGS  
Second in a Series of Three Articles

Grieving in prison is especially difficult for inmates. How the news of the death of a loved one is given has tremendous impact on the inmate. Some people learn about the death when the family comes up to inform her/him. This is ideally done with a counselor, chaplain, or social worker present. Sometimes the news is learned when the inmate calls home or another inmate says she/he heard about the death. If the death is from trauma, it is not unusual for the inmate to learn about it on the local news.

Having a counselor or chaplain present when they are given the news or immediately contacting them after the person learns about the death can be very helpful. Since the inmate is cut off from her/his support system, facilitating calls to loved ones lessens the sense of being completely alone. The staff person can also notify behavioral health.

Going to the funeral home in shackles and handcuffs is a humiliating experience for inmates and often a very stressful one for correctional officers. CO's walk a fine line in having to maintain security, maintain the rules of the correctional system and yet be supportive of the inmate at the same time.

Inmates have described how even very small gestures of kindness make this painful situation somewhat more bearable for them. For example, some CO's will give the inmate a prayer or a flower (to women inmates) to place in the coffin. Others have given a sympathy card or a note acknowledging how difficult this situation must be for them. In the jail system, the inmate is transported by the sheriff depart-

ment and the officers do not know the inmate at all which further complicates the ability to know how to be most helpful. However, any gesture that helps the inmate feel like a person not just a prisoner eases the trauma of this experience.

The ideal situation for both the inmate and CO or sheriff department staff person is for a counselor, chaplain or other support person to accompany the inmate during this visit. Because of security issues this usually does not happen but should be explored in select situations such as the death of a child. This may require that policies be re-examined and changed. But in the long run, everyone benefits.

Coming back to the prison after the funeral home visit presents unique challenges. Being able to express one's sadness and appropriate anger is very difficult. Inmates describe how tears are often seen as a sign of weakness and therefore they feel the need to maintain a 'tough' exterior. Since the expression of anger can be threatening to prison life, being able to use ways to express anger in an acceptable manner is critical. Exercise, art, journaling, talking to a counselor or chaplain are possible ways to help inmates deal with anger, guilt and sadness that accompanies death and the inability to be with the family and other support systems.

Being incarcerated presents barriers to accessing resources that are available to people 'on the outside.' The opportunity to be with others who share and support their grief and to participate in important rituals such as planning and attending the funeral is not possible. Choose to be with

individuals who are nurturing and to find creative outlets for dealing with painful feelings such as exercise, art, music, distraction, or even prayer groups are limited at best. Small gestures such as receiving flowers are not possible. The lack of privacy is another complicating factor. A private place to cry or even the freedom to rest quietly and relax is limited or often unavailable. Inmates therefore grieve in isolation, lacking the opportunity to be with others who share and support their grief.

Given the numerous constraints imposed by incarceration, inmates often need to suspend their grief, making it extremely difficult when they are released from prison. They not only have to deal with numerous adjustments of day to day life, but are also often 'hit hard' with grief that has not been dealt with. This situation creates additional problems for the inmate, leading to a more complicated, painful and difficult bereavement.

One type of loss that needs to be recognized and planned for is the death of another inmate. For persons who are incarcerated, there is the family on the outside and the inmate family. Being able to acknowledge the friendship ties that develop between inmates is important in the grieving process. Memorial services are helpful in validating the relationship and giving a safe place to grieve as an inmate community. These memorial services have been held in both state and federal facilities and also in jails. All involved including COs, social workers, counselors, and chaplain have found that they are helpful in decreasing

(continued on page 17)



(Grief continued from page 16) tension.

The following resources that can make a difference in the grief of inmates include: (1) Giving information about grief and how to manage grief in prison is one way that CO's and clinical staff can be helpful. One example is the pamphlet When Death Enters Your Life: A Grief Pamphlet for People in Prisons or Jails written by Phyllis B. Taylor and Ginette G. Ferszt is now available free of charge, in English and Spanish (2) grief groups facilitated by clinical staff or chaplains provide opportunities for inmates to share their grief and discuss cop-

ing with grief in prison or jail; (3) the use of art is an excellent treatment approach for providing a safe way for inmates to express difficult feelings such as sadness, anger, and guilt; (4) drawing, writing prose and poetry can be done in one's cell or in a group if that is provided in the facility (5) visits by chaplains who are trained in loss, grief and bereavement can be helpful as the person works through her/his grief and the spiritual questions that often accompany death. Rituals that acknowledge the death can also be performed by the chaplain. For example, we have led a mini-funeral on the anniversary of a death for an

inmate who was so drug addicted that he was not at the funeral of his parents. Finally contact with family can be healing if the inmate and the family have contact during the initial confrontation with grief and in the months following. This can be done through visits, phone contact, and cards.

One reality of the grief experience is the sense of being totally alone. This is seriously compounded by incarceration. Anything we can do to lessen the sense of isolation and to help the healing process may impact on the behavior of the inmate while in prison and lessen the chance of relapse when released.

Ginette G. Ferszt, PhD, RN, CS, CT. Associate Professor at the University of R.I., is certified as a psychiatric clinical nurse specialist and certified in Thanatology. For the past 25 years her clinical work, teaching and research has focused on loss and grief. Since 1997 she has concentrated on grief in corrections.

Phyllis B. Taylor, RN, BA, CGF, is an Auxiliary Chaplain Specializing in Grief and Bereavement in the Philadelphia Prison System and is also the Hospice and Comfort Care Consultant for the System. She is a Hospice Nurse, Certified Bereavement Counselor and has worked in the field of End of Life and Bereavement for over 30 years.

(Continued on page 17)