

A Place to Grieve: Creating a Space to Reflect after a Client's Death

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Death is a constant companion for us in the work we do as oncology social workers. It is the uninvited guest that comes into the room. As professionals, we cannot help but be affected by the depth, complexity and sometimes, the finality of our work with people with cancer and their families.



Secondary trauma and compassion fatigue have been studied extensively and the findings prove how prevalent and damaging these are if not addressed.

Just as we applaud our clients for reaching out for help, we should also recognize that we can lessen our own burdens by small acts of healing and community-building.

There are many ways to mitigate these effects and to find solace after a client's death such as compassionate self-care and supportive workplaces.

Ultimately, developing distinct personal rituals that ease our sorrow are vital because we can make use of these skills anywhere. They are part of our private toolbox of coping skills.

We use poetry, prayer, a silent moment, meditation, a walk, a head shake, a deep breath, or strenuous physical activity to help transition from sadness back to reality. The list goes on and on and is as varied and specific as each one of us. But no matter what practice one participates in, it is important to find an inner place of comfort.



To validate our feelings around this, CancerCare has created a physical place. We call it the Reflections Corner.

It is simply a glass table and a chair with a journal where you can write something personal or universal about what this loss means to you. We have placed two glass cylinders on the table. One is filled with small black stones. When someone dies, some of us remove a stone from the tall cylinder and place it in the smaller one.

By integrating the essence of these practices into something that can be shared, like a memorial service, we can create a different type of healing. The power of being part of a community expands the content and sentiment in ways that can be very potent and compelling.

Bearing witness as a group focuses us and is a validation of the depth and meaning of the work we do and the connections that we make.

To commemorate these individuals, we have a Remembrance Gathering every December. The social work staff and some of our support staff come together to pay tribute to the people that we knew and lost. We do a guided meditation and read some poetry to mark this time as out of the ordinary.

We place long stem white roses on a table with all the objects from the Reflections Corner table in a meeting room. As each of us speaks about our client, we take a rose and place it in the vase. By the end of the morning, we have a beautiful bouquet. By using the live flower to represent each death, we symbolically depict that sometimes from death comes life.

