

# The Bereavement Buddy

Connecting and linking the community with NSW NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief

Issue 2, August 2010

## In Grief and in Joy... Telling Your Story



People are hungry for stories. It's part of our very being. Storytelling is a form of history, of immortality too. It goes from one generation to another. —Studs Terkel

Feature Article by Nan Zastrow

Recently, I attended the funeral of my uncle, though I found myself making excuses for dismissing my obligation to go. When I read his obituary in the newspaper, I didn't plan to go to the funeral because I hadn't seen my cousins in about thirty years (they all lived out of town and so did my uncle.) I wouldn't recognize them, nor would they recognize me!

In the end, I decided that I needed to attend. Even though none of my cousins recognized me, just the mention of my name and whose daughter I was

brought forth the dawn of recognition and removed all the barriers that time had imposed. We chuckled over the fact that we all had "aged a little bit" and noted the strong family resemblance that couldn't be denied.

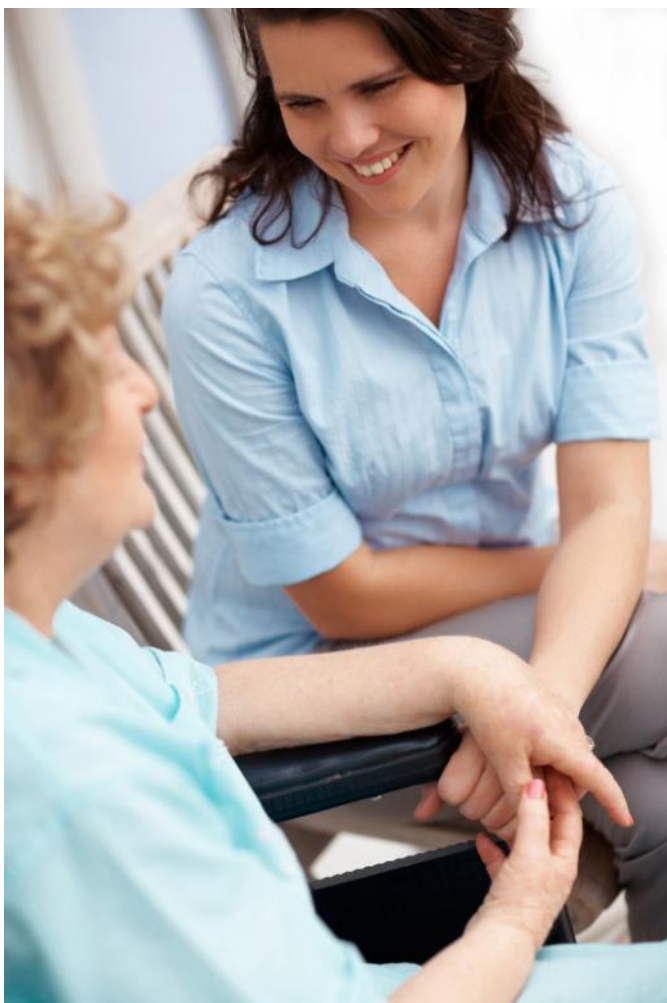
Funerals and weddings may be described as a time when extended families get together for a mini-reunion. In our busy lives, we've distanced ourselves from family ties and seldom make an effort to connect, other than an occasional Christmas card or email. But when a funeral or wedding event draws family home, it can be a time of reuniting with our past and a time to catch a glimpse of our future.

Siblings, cousins, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles gather to honor the event. But, the reason for coming often has even stronger significance than the

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ceremonial gathering. It's a time to tell the stories, in grief and in joy, of days gone by, and the experiences that brought us to this point in our lives. Stories are the interesting portals of life. When told individually, they are just stories, but when woven with the threads of everyone's memories combined, they speak volumes about the family legacy.

At my uncle's visitation, cousins quickly grouped together, put names to the faces in frayed picture albums and synchronized the forgotten faces of the generations that gave us our roots. We greedily searched for a glance of fond memories and good times, anything that symbolized we were once more closely bound than we are today. We reminisced about family, now deceased, and mentally calculated the vintage of the house or car in the picture, or the time and the place where the candid photo was taken. And, after sharing the stories, we hugged each other and laughed once again. Hours later, each returned to his or her life and wondered what the next occasion might be that would bring us together. For those brief few hours in time, we were family reuniting as if it were decades earlier.

Telling stories is an important part of healing grief. Story preparation gives the griever control of whatever details and emotions he or she is willing to

reveal. We all know the feeling of being "surprised" when someone asks blunt questions about our loved one's death or says something that empties our emotional deposit of tears.

Plan your story and know what you want to say before you begin. It's human nature to want to share the stories of life (and death) with someone who will listen, but initially you may have a difficult time blurring out even the "short" version of your loved one's death. Prepare yourself to tell just enough to answer immediate questions. Nothing more is expected. Over time, you will feel more comfortable telling the details to trusted family and friends. If necessary, practice telling your story, because you will be asked time and time again—both at the funeral and in the months that follow. Take every opportunity to tell your story because repetition makes it easier and ultimately, that is what helps heal the pain.

Your story should answer basic questions, and it can be told through pictures and items as well as words. Here are some of the things I have learned over the years of telling Chad's story.

### **Plan your response to sensitive questions**

Your story should answer: "What happened? How did he die?" This can be a short or long answer, whatever is most comfortable for you. It will likely vary depending upon who is asking the question. When death is natural or anticipated, we may find it easier to tell the story. There may be some relief that suffering is over or that the life was well-lived. (But this doesn't negate our need to grieve.) When a death was sudden or unexpected, the griever may be very emotional about the details. Some people may be curious and pry for more information than you are willing to share, so plan to prevent a defensive reaction to innocent comments that seem insensitive. People sometimes speak without thinking how their remark may sound—and we react.

When our son, Chad died as a result of suicide, I was very sensitive to this social taboo. I shuddered when someone asked me what happened, wishing I didn't have to answer. When I wasn't comfortable, I subtly dismissed the question and volunteered "other" information. People usually don't press for details when you do that. Know what makes you uncomfortable and plan your story so you can minimize touching your emotional reservoir, even if it means not responding to some questions asked or giving very brief details.

## Reveal the passions and strengths of the person who died

Your story should answer: “What was he like?” Stories celebrate the life of the person who died; and sometimes, “things” tell the most obvious story. Reveal your loved one’s passion about what was important to him. Perhaps it was golf, woodworking, music, gardening, a job, needlework, volunteer work or being a sports fan—whatever it was that reminds you of him. Bringing memorabilia of these special times to the funeral gives visitors and family a glimpse of the phases of life and fill in the gaps where words fall short. For some, the years have passed with little contact, and it’s a comforting feeling to see what gave the deceased meaning and purpose.

## Validate Relationships

Your story should answer: “Our relationship was...” or, “He talked about the time when you...” Describe your relationship: “We were very close. I’ll miss him. He was my best friend.” Or validate his relationship with others. Everyone likes to know their relationship with the deceased was recognized, even if in a small way. Posting pictures of family and friends with the person who died tells its own story and

can also validate relationships by commenting to an individual that their loved one spoke of him or her in a positive way. Relating a story you know about connects your listener with the deceased. Friends and family will often respond with a similar story.

**Never underestimate how far-reaching relationships extend. When my dad died at age seventy-nine, we thought his circle of friends was quite small. We were astounded when dozens and dozens of people came to the visitation. Some had met him through the pool league (billiards), others through his bartending job. People in their twenties through their eighties came to acknowledge their relationship with my dad.**

## Encourage Imagination

Your story should answer: “I remember the time when...” Everyone feels comfortable over a good chuckle or an adventurous story. Tell humorous accounts of human blunders or reveal stories of risks taken, accomplishments made and forgotten dreams. When you tell your story, find ways to excite the listener’s imagination so that he or she can visualize exactly what you are saying. We live vicariously through the stories of others.



creates joyful conversation at a visitation. But family

Some of your best stories will come from people who came to pay their respects and share a memory with you. The evening of Chad's visitation, my husband picked up a photo that was among our son's belongings from an Army National Guard training in Utah a few months earlier. Chad appeared in the photo with three officers, but we didn't know the story that went with the photo. When the officers who came to his funeral saw the photo, they finished the amusing story behind the mischievous grin that Chad wore. This story has been an important part of our memories since that day and reminds us that everybody loves a story and the stories of life are priceless.

## Pause, reflect, and connect

**Your story should answer: "So, what is the connection?" We all try to make connections with other people that make us feel good. We want to relate to the challenges, frustrations and ups and downs of life. We want to bank these stories in our memory of people met, places visited, things learned and experiences had. We connect with joy (wedding, births, celebrations) and we connect with sorrow (loss, defeat, illness, hard times). We may react with a lump in the throat, a tear in the eye or a hearty laugh from deep within. We are spiritual beings having human experiences—trying to make sense out of life and death. We are creating our own story of life.**

Your story can make a soul connection. It's also the moment that allows you to slow your racing heart, regain your composure and give honor to someone special. Stories are about remembering. Our son died thirteen years ago, and his story continues to evolve. In my book, I have a tribute that says, "Because I loved him I remember. Because I remember, he will never die."

Your story is a gift. When you tell it, you disclose your love and the soul connection you have with the person who died. Nothing is more sacred or more respected than the memory that lingers. Stories, whether you are telling them or hearing them from someone else are the windows to the heart. The hope that emerges redefines you. You are who you are, partly because of your relationship with the person who died. The stories of a life lived can enrich and bless you, and the lives of those still living.

Connect with your inner psyche; breathe deeply; relax. This is your moment, your time to tell the story, in grief and in joy. Each becomes a part of your journal of life.

Published Grief Digest, July 2006

Sourced from [www.wingsgrief.org/](http://www.wingsgrief.org/)

# From the



# NALAG Centre

## Trudy Hanson OAM

Manager NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Grief Counsellor & Educator

Welcome to second issue of the Bereavement Buddy for 2010. August is fast approaching and I wanted to take this opportunity to let you know about our Grief Awareness Week celebrations and events.

The theme for Grief Awareness Week 2010 is "Honouring the Story". We invite you to join us in bringing to life our stories of loss and change.

The stories of what we have lost or let go live on within us. You may be grieving someone you love who has died, a relationship that broke down, property or livelihood that was lost or a way of life you can no longer lead. Memories of these things – the happy and sad times, the things that made them special – are never far from our thoughts. Often we can be surprised by a memory which bubbles up in response to a song, a smell or a sight.

This year, as we Honour the Story together, we will share these precious memories with one another. This is an opportunity to bring the important person, relationship, thing, or way of life into the lives of others, by introducing them to that which has held such an important place in your heart and life. This can be a valuable way of both honouring what has been and finding a new place for it in your life.

There may be a particular story you could share which reflects the essence of the person, thing, place or lifestyle that you miss. There are many other ways we can honour the story and share our memories with one another, too. Below are some ideas of how you may capture this in words or by doing something symbolic.

For events in Dubbo please see the For Your Diary page on the back of this issue of the Bereavement Buddy - we will be holding a number of celebrations and events to mark Grief Awareness Week.

## Suggestions for Grief Awareness Week Celebrations

- Remembering Ceremony. Create a hold a special ceremony to remember and acknowledge the losses that may have occurred in your family over the past year. Light a candle for each loss and ask members of the community to light the candle etc.
- Favourite Food. You might each bring a dish to share – something connected to a memory you wish to share.
- Memory Box. Create a memory box filled with trinkets that hold special meaning and memories.
- Photo Albums. Share photos that illustrate your memories and tell the story of when, where and why the photos were taken.
- Music. Play music that holds a special memory of what you have lost and share the story of why that music is significant
- Memorial Garden. Plant a garden that consists of the plants or trees that honour the person, thing, place or lifestyle you have lost.

For more ideas and suggestions on how you can celebrate Grief Awareness Week 2010 or events that may be happening close to you visit our website [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au).

## Wattle The Symbol of Grief

Just as over one thousand types of wattle bloom around Australia - so do countless individuals experience grief across our vast nation.

Just as somewhere, somehow, children, women and men are struggling with the impact of loss in their lives every day of the year, so too do wattle trees brace themselves against the elements that often threaten to destroy them when natural forces demonstrate their strength.

Just as people from all walks of life move through their passages of pain into new and different ways of being so too does the wattle regenerate again and again and grow to blossom and offer a sign of new life to all who view it.

## Information for Support Volunteers

### Supervision

Supervision is mandatory for all NALAG Support Volunteers.

The next supervision session will be on **Monday, 16th August 2010 starting 12.00 - 2.00 pm (bring some lunch to share in between if you like).**

If you are seeing clients at present you are required to attend. Please call the NALAG Centre on 6882 9222 to confirm your attendance.

### Statistics

Volunteer statistics forms are due 7 days after the end of the month (7th of the next month). Please make sure you complete your statistics from each month and return to the NALAG Centre by fax: 02 6884 9100 or email [nalag@hwy.com.au](mailto:nalag@hwy.com.au).

### Volunteer Meeting

The NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief in Dubbo will hold a Volunteer Meeting to discuss a number of matters relating to Grief Week, Client Work and VRA Service Medal Dinner and Presentation.

**When:** Thursday, 5th August 2010

**Time:** 11.00 am—12.30 am

**Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Welchman Street, Dubbo

**RSVP:** NALAG Centre on 6882 9222



# For Your Diary...coming events

August 2010

## Volunteer Meeting - Dubbo

The NALAG Centre would like to invite all Dubbo and surrounding area Volunteers to a meeting to discuss Grief Awareness Week Celebrations and Events and ask for your assistance during Grief Week. We will also discuss supervision, VRA Service Medal Dinner and Laughter Yoga!

Please join us for the meeting and a light lunch afterwards!

**When:** Thursday, 5th August, 2010  
**Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Welchman St, Dubbo  
**Time:** 11.00 am  
**RSVP:** To RSVP call Shelley or Paula  
on 6882 9222.

## Supervision - Dubbo

All NALAG Volunteers who are seeing clients are required to attend monthly supervision. The next supervision session will be held:

**When:** Monday 16th August 2010  
**Time:** 12.00 - 2.00pm  
**Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Welchman Street  
**RSVP:** 02 6882 9222

## Discounts on NALAG Education

Become a Member of NALAG you will receive concessional prices on some courses offered by NALAG. You will also receive the *NALAG News* publication together with the Bereavement Buddy E-Newsletter. See our website [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au) for Membership forms.

## Grief Awareness Week 2010 "Honouring the Story After Grief and Loss"

Commencing on Sunday 22nd of August 2010 and continuing to Saturday 28th August, Grief Awareness Week is an opportunity for us to acknowledge loss and promote resilience in our community.

### Remembering Ceremony

This is a ceremony to remember loved ones lost and other losses we have experienced over the past year in our community - such losses as homeland, disability, pet loss, divorce and separation. Please join us afterward for a light lunch.

**When:** Sunday, 22nd August 2010  
**Time:** 12.00 Noon  
**Where:** St Brigids Church  
Brisbane Street, Dubbo  
**RSVP:** Phone 02 6882 9222

### Scrap Booking Day

Clients and members are welcome to join us in making beautiful memory books using scrap booking techniques. All materials will be provided.

**When:** Wednesday, 25th August 2010  
**Time:** 10.00am - 3.00 pm  
**Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Welchman Street  
**Cost:** FREE - Lunch provided

### Memory Day

Clients and members are invited come to the NALAG Centre to share stories with others about their loved one who has died or is no longer with them. Bring a photo, share a funny story, bring some of their favourite food to share. This session will be about honouring the story of loss and promoting hope and healing through grief.

**When:** Thursday, 26th August 2010  
**Time:** 10.00 am - 1.00 pm  
**Where:** NALAG Centre for Loss & Grief  
Welchman Street  
**Cost:** FREE - Lunch provided

### All enquires and bookings:

Paula Hanson - Education and Promotions Officer  
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**Website:** [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)