

# Using the Accessibility of Email to Address Grief and Loss in the Clinical Care Team

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**Background:** It is difficult to provide a timely debrief for clinicians following a patient death in the acute care setting due to conflicting schedules, staffing demands and the logistics of patient care. Using the concept behind the narrative medicine movement, that writing can help one process feelings of sadness and grief, an email journaling project was initiated in the Hematology/Oncology Care Center, to both model journaling and provide an opportunity to acknowledge a loss before moving on to tend to another patient's needs.

**Objectives:** Evaluate the effectiveness of email as an efficient modality to reach all team members following a patient death in the acute care setting, and as a tool to address grief, loss, and burnout in the clinical care team.

**Methods:** After the loss of a pediatric oncology patient, an email briefly detailing the patient's end of life course is written by the Supportive Care RN Coordinator and shared with the multi-disciplinary pediatric oncology care team. The goal of the email debrief is to provide some closure with words of inspiration and support, as well as to acknowledge the hard work of the team and the burden of the loss of a patient. It is also an opportunity to model the use of journaling to help process the often difficult work of pediatric end-of-life care. The email goes on to encourage each staff member to find their own approach to share their stories, debrief the loss and perform good self-care.

**Results:** The email journaling project, initiated in 2011, has been found to be an effective and efficient process to recognize the collective grief experienced by members of the treating team following the loss of a patient. RCHSD RN compassion satisfaction scores in a 2013 survey were found to be highest in the hematology/oncology unit, while the reported rates of burnout were lowest.<sup>1</sup> Very positive anecdotal feedback has been received following team email debriefs ("Thank you so much for always sending remembering. You have a gift of putting into words and painting pictures what each of our hearts feel")

**Conclusion:** While it does not replace face-to-face debriefing, email journaling following the death of a patient is an effective way to reach each member of the clinical care team in a timely fashion. The multidisciplinary care team provides a network of support for both the patients and families it serves, **and for the clinicians who rely on each other's strengths.** The highest goal of this intervention is to establish an easily accessible pathway to help begin to address clinician grief and loss, transform compassion fatigue into compassion satisfaction, and nurture resilience in the clinical care team.

## References:

1. Michi A. Sekol, Son Chae Kim. Job satisfaction, burnout, and stress among pediatric nurses in various specialty units at an acute care hospital. Journal of Nursing Education and Practice. 2014

## Sample Email Debrief to the H/O Care Team:

Heroes are brave, they tell the truth,  
they are good swordsmen.

Heroes take journeys, confront dragons,  
and discover the treasure of their true selves.

Heroes are never, in the long run, really defeated.

People ask us all the time... "How do you work with sick children?" This work is not for the faint of heart- it does take great courage, wisdom, and compassion, but how many people get to say they work with real super heroes every single day?

Daily, we are a powerful witness to bravery as our heroes confront the dragons on their path with easy smiles and quiet inner strength; we are inspired by the treasures of their true selves. And if it becomes clear that the dragons are too many and too fierce, in the sweet, tender presence of those who love them most, they lay down their swords, not giving up, but knowing with super-human grace when the time has come to gently let go. Their body's tire, but their hero-souls remain ever strong.

They do not walk the hero's journey alone. Their families, friends, and our care team fight tirelessly alongside them. Yes, the hero's journey is a difficult path. They endure much, but always surrounded and protected by the forces of faith, hope, and love. We work toward peace and gentleness in those last precious moments; we keep the sacred vigil as they are loved from this life as we know it, to the Next. In the midst of our sadness and loss, we remember the smiles, the sweetness, and the lessons they shared.

We remind ourselves too, that it is a privilege to know and care for heroes such as these. Please take some time to honor your own hero self this weekend. ... allow yourself a little time for mindfulness- notice the blue of the sky, or the vastness of the ocean- BREATHE! Laugh with a friend, hug someone you love- whatever fills you up. And don't forget that we have each other- talking is good soul medicine! My door is always open. Thank you for choosing this sacred work! ♥

Blessed is the influence of one true, loving  
human soul to another. -George Elliot

