Supporting Families Facing Loss:
Anticipatory Grief

Elizabeth A. Keene
VP, Mission Effectiveness
St. Mary’s Health System
Lewiston, Maine
ekeene@stmarysmaine.com
Definition of Terms

Loss=Change=Grief

• Grief-the physical, psychological, spiritual, cognitive and behavioral responses to the (perceived) threat of a loss

• Mourning-the outward expression of grief

• Bereavement-the state of having suffered a loss
Anticipatory Grief
(aka Anticipatory Mourning, Preparatory Grief)

• Response to awareness of a life-threatening or terminal illness in oneself or a significant other and the recognition of associated losses

Anticipatory Grief

Potential losses associated with illness:

- Loss of bodily function
- Loss of hopes, dreams
- Loss of employment/finances
- Loss of independence/control
- Loss of feeling of self-worth
- Loss of cognitive function
- Loss of role in family
Illness Trajectories

- **A**: Sudden Death
  - Function: High \rightarrow \text{Death}
  - Time: High \rightarrow \text{Death}

- **B**: Terminal Illness
  - Function: High \rightarrow \text{Death}
  - Time: High \rightarrow \text{Death}

- **C**: Organ Failure
  - Function: High \rightarrow \text{Death}
  - Time: High \rightarrow \text{Death}

- **D**: Frailty
  - Function: High \rightarrow \text{Death}
  - Time: High \rightarrow \text{Death}
EVOLVING MODEL OF PALLIATIVE CARE

Cure/Life-prolonging Intent

Palliative/Comfort Intent

DEATH

Bereavement
Anticipatory Grief

- Forewarning is not a sufficient condition for realistic anticipation!
- Misinterpretation - “hydrological theory of grief”

Supporting Families Facing Loss

EASE Model

• Educate

• Assess

• Support

• Explore Needs/Strengths

The EASE Model: Educate

- Normalize grief as a natural response to loss
- Identify the range of typical responses
- Allow for individual differences
The EASE Model: Assess

- Physical health
- Emotional/mental health
- Spiritual needs/strengths
- Behavioral/social changes
- Loss history
- Risk for complicated grief
Assess

• What concerns you most right now?
• What brings you comfort?
• What does your experience look and feel like?
• With whom do you talk?
• What behavior changes are you seeing in your children?
Assess

• Emotional/Mental Health
  – History of mental health issues
  – Common response: inability to concentrate and/or forgetfulness ("I feel like I’m going crazy!")
  – “Roller coaster” of emotions

Assess

• Spiritual Needs/Strengths

  – Religious or theological
    • Providence, fate, God’s will
    • Afterlife
    • Suffering as redemptive
    • Support of religious community
  – Existential
    • Meaning
    • Purpose
Assess

• Behavioral/Social Changes
  – Family
  – Financial status/employment
  – Impact on children in the family

• Loss History
  – Previous losses, including non-death–related
  – Recent secondary losses (financial, home)
  – Disenfranchised (socially taboo) losses
  – Cumulative losses
  – Inability to grieve prior losses
Assessing for Risks of Complicated Grief

• Predictors
  – Violence of the death
  – Ability to make sense of the death

(Post-death assessment):
• Length of time that symptoms have persisted
• Extent of interference in daily life
  – Extreme isolation
  – Abrupt major lifestyle changes
• Intensity of symptoms
  – Suicidal ideation
  – Severe depression
The EASE Model: Support

- Be present; be available

- Communication
  - Need for short, frequent conversations
  - Isolated incidents long remembered
  - Realistic life expectancy
The EASE Model: Support

- **Coping**
  - Problem-focused coping and positive reappraisal most effective strategies in maintaining positive affect

- **Decision-making**
  - Goals of care

- **Life review/legacy**
The EASE Model: Explore Needs and Strengths

- Perception of support
  - Family
  - Community
- Communication Preference
- Education Preference
- Changes over time
Reflections by
Mrs. Rose McCloskey