Seven Tips for Helping People with Intellectual Disabilities Cope with Grief

As a music therapist and licensed mental health counselor who worked for more than a decade in a special education setting before coming to work full-time in hospice, I have a particularly strong interest in helping clients with intellectual disabilities navigate the rough waters of grief and bereavement.

Some of the most important points that professionals need to consider when helping this population are:

1. **There is a serious lack of death education** with this population, and clients may need extra help and sensitive attention to learn what death means.

2. **Think creatively:** Your client may need to go many times to the empty house to search again for her mother. She may need to feel her own heartbeat, and yours, to understand alive, in order to then understand dead.

3. **One does not need to understand the concept of death in order to feel the loss and the grief:** we have to presume clients are experiencing the loss on every level, no matter what they can or cannot tell us with words.

4. **Some of the most serious problems arise** when well-meaning family members and professionals assume these clients need to be protected from the truth and from experiencing their grief.

5. **Actions usually speak more clearly than words,** and you may see grief expressed in searching, fleeing, withdrawing, aggressing, self-injuring, regressing, and particularly in increasing compulsivity.

6. **Ask yourself:** What is my client saying with what s/he is doing? What does it mean? What does s/he need to move on?

7. **Especially if your client is non-verbal,** use as many non-verbal ways of expressing emotion as possible: vocalize and sing on “ah,” draw, paint, dance, tear paper, throw things, beat a drum (use a mallet or stick), shake maracas or bells, yell, hit a pillow. Help them move all the way through the expression and onto something else before you stop to steer away from compulsive repetition. Open and close sessions with a positive, connecting, and meaningful song.

Ms. Kynvi, from the Merrimack Valley Hospice in Lawrence, MA, presented on this topic at a session at NHPCO’s Clinical Team Conference. An NHF staff member attending this session thought that the information was so important that it should be shared widely. Ms. Kynvi is happy to answer questions. She invites contact at 978-552-4151 or lkynvi@homehealthfoundation.org