GRIEF, SPIRITUALITY AND HEALTH IN LATER LIFE

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The studies

- Aged 62-96 years
- First group: 20 frail elderly nursing home residents, cognitively competent
  - In-depth interviews
- Second group: 113 elderly residential aged care people with dementia (Ave MMSE at entry 18.12 and 16.09 at exit)
  - In-depth interviews followed by weekly small group sessions of spiritual reminiscence for 24 weeks.
- Analysis of qualitative data by NVivo7
Main themes
- Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)
- Grief and coping – a faith perspective
- Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
- Grief for untimely deaths - Death of parent/s in childhood, death of child

On death & dying:
- Fear of dying
- “Why doesn’t God take me?”

Grief is part of life (Attitudes to grief)
“Apart from losing my mother and sister and my hubby, I don’t think I’ve had much grief.”

Grief and coping – a faith perspective
Grief is hard to talk about (Attitudes to grief)
Grief of parents who had lost a child through death
Grief in frail older cognitively competent people

On death & dying:
- Fear of dying
  “Life’s one big fear for me”

“grief as part of life” and “fear of dying” not found in the same participants

“Why doesn’t God take me?”

I'm not looking forward to getting well, I'm striving to get well, I do everything they tell me, but I'm looking forward to be taken. Firstly it's my faith that keeps me going and secondly it's the help I'm getting here with physio and the help with the nurses and thirdly, I wonder why God doesn't take me when I pray every night that he will
Confusion of relationships

As asked where they found meaning in life, most said they found meaning through family.

Relationship, or connectedness, which seems to express this better for those with dementia, is almost synonymous with meaning.

Grief - Is part of life (most participants)
- Loss of relationships
- Grief and faith
- Grief for lost opportunities (only one person)
- Loss over leaving parents in country while young
On death and dying: people with dementia

- **Fear of dying**
  - The only fear expressed was fear of dying alone - by one person - described herself as a “lapsed Anglican”
  - Betty said: “To seek first the kingdom of heaven, and all these things will be over unto you”
  - Stand there beside you all the time, even though you can't see it, you can put your hand on it.”

Grief in older people with dementia

- **Where do these people find meaning?**

  MMSE 12 GG05:
  “Relationship with the Lord, holding onto that firm. That’s another point of mine.
  I look to seeing the, my Jesus, I love thee, I know thou art my, feel the presence of sin I resign.”
A sense of peace and acceptance?

- Are these people at a stage of peace and acceptance?
  Or –
  do they just not know what is going on having lost cognitive competencies?
Could this be a time of emotional and spiritual connection into the process of dying.

conclusion

- Differences between frail elderly but cognitively competent group and those with dementia. *Fear an important factor in facing process of dying.*
  - Fear of dying important among cognitively competent older group
  - Almost no expressed fear of dying among those with dementia
  - Grief as part of life – more agreement on this with those with dementia
  - Coping and faith present in both groups
Is there the possibility of resilience and health in older people who are facing death and dying? Fear of death and reluctance to speak of death and dying hinder better support of those who are dying. New programs of palliative care in ageing are being implemented, spiritual and pastoral care being developed. (www.nhmrc.gov.au/PUBLICATIONS/synopses/_files/p29.pdf) Spiritual care in dementia needs to be available as a part of holistic care for these people. Spiritual growth remains a possibility while life continues.