



# WinterSpring

Facing Loss, Embracing Life Again -- Together

PO Box 8169, Medford, OR 97501

541-552-0621 winterspring.org

## CASE STATEMENT FOR FUNDING The Cost of Unresolved Grief

**MISSION:** We help children, teens and adults, who are experiencing the pain of loss, to embrace life again.

**VISION:** WinterSpring is the “go-to” organization for grief and loss support in Southern Oregon.

**Overview:** While death is a normal part of life, our society doesn’t do well with the complications of grief that follows the death of a close loved-one. People often feel alone and unable to move forward in their lives, depending on factors such as the closeness of the relationship, the type of death, their own personality, and the level of life changes required after a death (such as having to move). Children and teens are especially vulnerable, since a family is often in turmoil after a death. Grief is not a billable diagnosis, yet unresolved grief is implicated as a factor in many behavioral and physical diagnoses, such as depression and recurring illness. Consistent with the ACES study on the impact of adverse childhood experiences, the trauma of loss carries long-range health implications. When people get bereavement support, many of the socio-economic costs of unresolved grief can be avoided.

WinterSpring offers peer-to-peer group support with trained staff and volunteer facilitators using a companionship model. We also provide compassionate phone support, individual peer support, education, resources and referrals. Our peer-to-peer groups support adults, children, teens, and parents/guardians. It’s through sharing of stories, connecting with others, and learning tools/techniques for healthy grieving that people are able to heal and embrace life again. Research<sup>1</sup> and our experience shows that group support intervention for both children and parents/guardians, as well as education to the parents and other adults in kids’ lives, can lead to healthy grieving and avoid the costs of unresolved grief as children grow to adulthood. Adults find that they are better able to adjust to a new and different life after attending our groups. Many form bonds with others in the groups that last well-beyond their time with WinterSpring, and those bonds become the source of support in their life after loss.

**The Cost of Unresolved Grief:** The emotional burden of the loss of a loved one—sadness, anger, stress, guilt, regret, numbness, lack of control, sleep deprivation, fatigue, muddled thinking, memory difficulties, disconnection from others—take a toll on the griever. Time may not always heal deep grief; compassionate group support and tools for healthy grieving can help alleviate these burdens that may otherwise turn into costs to our healthcare system. Specifically, unresolved grief can lead to:

- **Depression**—Many studies document the link between bereavement and depression/anxiety in adults and the need for treatment, especially when PTSD is diagnosed. Links have also been made for bereaved teens and depression, as well as long-term mental health problems for children after the death of a parent.<sup>2</sup>

- **Cardiovascular risk**--Heart break can quite literally lead to cardiovascular and immune systems weakness, as several studies show.<sup>3</sup>
- **Complicated grief**—The Center for Complicated Grief ([www.complicatedgrief.org](http://www.complicatedgrief.org)) defines this as: “a form of grief that takes hold of a person’s mind and won’t let go. People with complicated grief often say that they feel ‘stuck.’” Factors affecting grief that doesn’t subside include personal characteristics of the bereaved, the type of death, other challenging factors in that person’s life, and the relationship to the person who died. Often these people need professional intervention.
- **Substance abuse treatment**—Youth and adults may turn to alcohol and drugs to mask the pain. Often these behaviors mask the underlying grief cause.<sup>4</sup> Adults also turn to numbing substances when the pain is intense. People call WinterSpring while in treatment because the emotions come back up once they are clean and sober.
- **Recurring illness and increased healthcare costs**—Studies in the UK have shown a 30% increase in childhood visits to the doctor after a death, and also lament the lack of grief support services.<sup>5</sup>
- **Decreased workplace productivity**—The Grief Recovery Institute estimated the annual cost of workplace grief at \$75 billion.<sup>6</sup> Included in this figure is death of a loved one (\$37.5 billion) and pet loss (\$2.4 billion). The Compassionate Friends in Victoria Australia studied parents who had lost children, and found an average leave without pay of 15.5 weeks, as well as a significant impact of their work performance.<sup>7</sup>
- **Longer-term unemployment**—Links have been made in the research between the death of a parent and long-term unemployment.<sup>8</sup>
- **Childhood bereavement challenges**—One study showed that 1 in 7 children will lose a parent or sibling before the age of 20.<sup>9</sup> Children are more likely to have behavioral problems, abuse alcohol and drugs, experience anxiety, act out, have social challenges, struggle in school, and/or experience recurring illness and behavioral health challenges.<sup>10</sup>
- **Teen pregnancy**—Especially with sudden and traumatic death, bereaved teens are more likely to get pregnant.<sup>11</sup>
- **Developmental challenges in children and teens**—Research has found that when a parent has died, especially from a sudden death, adolescents have lower competence in work, peer relations, career planning, and educational aspirations. So-called maladaptive grief in kids can impact social and academic development.<sup>12</sup>
- **Marital strife**—Especially with the death of a child, married couples each grieve differently and this often causes challenges in their relationship which could lead to counseling costs and sometimes divorce.<sup>13</sup>
- **Financial decline**—Several studies point to loss of financial stability after a death, especially from the loss of a spouse or child.<sup>14</sup>
- **The stigma of a suicide death**—Grief is more likely to become complicated because of the guilt, stigma, shame, and feelings of rejection by those left behind.<sup>15</sup>
- **Mortality**—Studies looking at early mortality, including from suicide, suggest a higher risk for the bereaved, especially for certain types of loss, such as the death of a child or spouse.<sup>16</sup>
- **Impact on caregivers**—Studies have pointed to the impact on health care providers in a professional setting with both emotional and economic cost impacts.<sup>17</sup>

***Experiences from our support groups:***

***Andrea's story:*** Andrea was a troubled 15-year old and in a grief support group that she didn't want to attend. During the first meeting, she was sullen, uncommunicative, and slumped in her seat. She barely whispered her name as everyone introduced themselves. She passed when asked who died. The second meeting was similar for Andrea. During the third group meeting, the facilitators distributed a letter-writing exercise to the group—writing a letter to your loved one who died. The facilitators noticed that Andrea was writing continuously throughout the time period given. The students began to share their letters, and ten minutes before the end of the group, Andrea said she wanted to share. Through sobs, she read her letter to her step-dad who raised her, since her biological father had disappeared. She expressed regret for all the ways she had let him down and told him how much she loved and appreciated him. She told him how much she missed him since he died. To the facilitators, her letter reading was a break-through. They finished that group session with a candle-lighting ritual to “send” their messages to their loved ones. She wanted to keep her candle. The next week, Andrea was like a different girl, bright and communicative. A couple of weeks later, she brought a picture of her stepdad to share with the facilitators. At the end of the last group, she asked the facilitators to stay, while she showed them her picture album and some of her favorite mementos. Andrea was on her way to understanding her grief and healing.

***Nancy's story:*** Nancy's husband died in August, 2014. He was very ill for his last three months and in Nancy's words the "last two weeks were torture." She had to make the very difficult decision at the end to take him off all life support. At the time of her husband's death, Nancy had very few friends in town and no family nearby. She was seeing a counselor in private practice and finding this helpful, but not enough. When she first called WinterSpring, she was somewhat disoriented and in a kind of dazed shock. Nancy tried to attend a spouse loss group soon after she called, but was feeling so overwhelmed with not only her grief but the practical aspects of losing her husband of many years – including almost (but not quite!) moving to a different state to be closer to family – that she was only able to attend 2-3 sessions of that first series. Our program manager and facilitator kept in touch with her, and both encouraged her to try again. This is exactly what Nancy did, and the second time around her attendance was consistent for the eight-week group. She was ready and able to participate fully in the group, bonding with the other group members, including one new friend in particular, and coming to deeply appreciate the facilitators, the group, her own progress, and WinterSpring. In her words: “This group was an immense help to me.”

***Sandy and Evan's story:*** Sandy's son died by suicide in late 2013 leaving a wife and Sandy's young grandson, Evan. The family came to our Children's Program (CP), where Evan got lots of positive support from the group process. Sandy attended the parent support group during CP and learned about childhood grief as well as her own grief process. We also provided her with resources on suicide loss. At the group, she bonded with other parents and guardians. Nancy (Evan's mom) attended occasionally, but got involved with another man pretty quickly, and has since disappeared from Evan's life. Evan is now living with Sandy and receiving her solid support, because she learned how to be with his grief from this past year's program. Both Sandy and Evan are excited about returning to our Children's Program this fall, because it is a place of support, understanding, and healing. WinterSpring staff are grateful that we can provide this support to families broken by tragic loss.

## End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Morgan and Roberts, Helping Bereaved Children and Adolescents: Strategies and Implications for Counselors, *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 2010; Openshaw, Group interventions in rural schools to assist with a community trauma, *Contemporary Rural Social Work*, V. 5, 2013; Openshaw, School-based support groups for traumatized students. *School Psychology International*, 32, 2011; Werner-Lin and Biank, Holding parents so they can hold their children: Grief work with surviving spouses to support parentally bereaved children, *OMEGA* 66(1), 2012-2013.

<sup>2</sup> Lannen, Wolfe, Prigerson, Onelov and Kreicbergs, Unresolved grief in a national sample of bereaved parents: impaired mental and physical health 4 to 9 years later, *Journal of Clinical Oncology* 26(36) 2008; Onrust and Cuijpers, Mood and anxiety disorders in widowhood: A systematic review, *Aging and Mental Health* 10(4), 2006; Li, Larusen, Precht, Alsen and Morensen, Hospitalization for mental illness among parents after the death of a child. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 352(12), 2005; Ribbens-McCarthy and Jessop, Young people, bereavement and loss. Disruptive transitions? National Children's Bureau, Open University, 2005; Luecken, Long-term consequences of parental death in childhood: Physiological and psychological manifestations, in Stroebe, Hansson, Shut and Stroebe, *Handbook for Bereavement Research and Practice; 21st Century Perspectives*, Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Press, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Gupta, Dr. Sanjay, How grief can make you sick, 3/10/2015, <http://www.everydayhealth.com/news/how-grief-can-make-you-sick/>, accessed 7/15/2015; Buckley, McKinley, Tofler and Bartrop, Cardiovascular risk in early bereavement: a literature review and proposed mechanisms, *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 47(2), 2010.

<sup>4</sup> UCLA Newsroom, New UCLA—University of Texas checklist helps identify children, teens with bereavement disorder, 7/22/2015, [http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/new-ucla-university-of-texas-checklist-helps-identify-children-teens-with-bereavement-disorder?utm\\_source=UCLA+Today&utm\\_campaign=1729d0da60-UCLA\\_Today\\_July\\_23\\_2015\\_23\\_2015&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_32bda11970-1729d0da60-58976457](http://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/new-ucla-university-of-texas-checklist-helps-identify-children-teens-with-bereavement-disorder?utm_source=UCLA+Today&utm_campaign=1729d0da60-UCLA_Today_July_23_2015_23_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_32bda11970-1729d0da60-58976457), accessed on July 28, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the literature, see Birrell, et al., *Socio-Economic Costs of Bereavement in Scotland*, March 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Grief Recovery Institute and Educational Foundation. *The grief index: the "hidden" annual costs of grief in America's workplace*. Sherman Oaks (CA):GRIEF; 2003.

<sup>7</sup> The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc., *Beyond the Death of a Child: Social impact and economic costs following the death of a child*, August 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Ribbens-McCarthy and Jessop, Young people, bereavement and loss. Disruptive transitions? National Children's Bureau, Open University, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.comfortzonecamp.org/news/childhood-bereavement-study-results>, accessed July 29, 2015

<sup>10</sup> Fauth, Thompson, and Penny, *Associations between childhood bereavement and children's background, experiences and outcomes*. London: National Children's Bureau, 2009;

<sup>11</sup> Barnard, Moreland, and Nagy, *Children bereavement and trauma: Nurturing resilience*. Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Brent, Melhem, Masten, Porta and Payne, Longitudinal effects of parental bereavement on adolescent developmental competence, *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 41(6), 2012; UCLA Newsroom.

<sup>13</sup> Barrera. O'Connor, D'Agostino, Spencer, Micholas, Jobcecska, Tallet, and Schneiderma, Early parental adjustment and bereavement after childhood cancer death, *Death Studies* 33, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Corden and Hirst, Economic Components of Grief, *Death Studies* (37), 2013; Corden, Sloper, Sainsbury, Financial effects for families after the death of a disabled or chronically ill child: a neglected dimension of bereavement, *Child: Care, Health & Development* 28(3), 2002; Fox, Cacciatore, Lacasse, Child death in the United States: Productivity and the economic burden of parental grief, *Death Studies* 0, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, and Mortimer-Stephens, Complicated grief in survivors of suicide, *Crisis: Journal of Crisis Intervention & Suicide* 25(1), 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Boyle, Feng, and Raab, Does widowhood increase morality risk?: Testing for selection effects by comparing causes of spousal death, *Epidemiology* 22(1), 2011; Stroebe, Schut and Stroebe, Health outcomes of bereavement, *Lancet* 370, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Genevro and Miller, The emotional and economic costs of bereavement in health care settings, *Psychologica Belgica* 50, 2010.