Considering the needs of staff in relation to death and dying

Loss and death will affect all of us at some point in our life. When you work in health and social care it can been seen as an inevitable part of your job. This is the case in some care settings such as care homes, hospices and acute general hospitals where deaths may happen frequently. It is now well understood that in these settings staff can often experience a profound sense of grief when a person dies and they need support and guidance to express their feelings and find positive approaches to maintain good mental health and wellbeing.

With the current COVID 19 pandemic there is likely to be a substantial increased rate of mortality across all care settings and many staff who have been redeployed may not know what to expect or will not have seen a person die before.

It is important that individual teams and organisations recognise the potential impact of death and dying on these frontline staff. They need to have their grief acknowledged and be given an opportunity to express their emotions following a death or the potential cumulative effect of many deaths. The level and nature of organisational support will determine how staff process their grief and will influence their perception of how they think grief in the workplace is to be managed.

There are a wide range of evidenced based strategies, interventions and resources available to provide support to staff to express their emotions and promote resilience. For example, education and training, one to one or multidisciplinary debriefing to provide emotional support to staff in the wake of a distressing or unexpected death. This offers them the opportunity to respond to the person’s death and to make sense of it in the context of their relationship with the person.

Staff may cope more effectively with repeated exposure to trauma and death related situations when they find ways to understand and consolidate their experiences. Having knowledge and understanding about loss, grief and bereavement and how you can care for yourself is an important part of palliative and end of life care and support. You will find resources to support your wellbeing here.