



Coalition News

Quarterly Newsletter of the Minnesota Coalition for Death Education and Support
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Since 1977... Education and Support for Those Providing Care to Grieving Persons

June 2018

Mark Your Calendars

June 4-6 ♦ *International Death, Grief and Bereavement Conference*, sponsored by University of Wisconsin-LaCrosse. Info at <http://www.uwlax.edu/conted/dgb/>.

June 19 ♦ *Finding Compassionate Responses to Difficult Losses: Substance Abuse, Overdose and/or Suicide*. Plymouth Congregational Church. More info on page 9. Register at <https://tinyurl.com/bowman619>.

June 22-24 and Sept 21-23 ♦ *Camp Erin Children's Bereavement Camp*. Info at www.fairview.org/~media/Fairview/PDFs/Our-Community-Commitment/Camp-Erin-2018-Flyer.ashx?la=en.

Sept 28-30 ♦ *Addiction & Faith Conference*, Bloomington. Info at www.addictionandfaithconference.com and also on page 9.

October 5 ♦ *MCDES Fall Conference: Bringing Compassion and Competence to End of Life Care*. Info on page 9 and at www.mcdes.org. Online registration begins August 1.

MCDES Spring Conference Review

Why & How We Get Hooked & What We Can Do About It: The Intersection of Addiction & Grief

Reviewed by Rebecca Long

- Nearly 21 million Americans are struggling with drug or alcohol addiction. This is more than the number of people diagnosed with cancer.
- According to the Centers for Disease Control, more than 30,000 people have died from opioids. This number is up 16% than the previous record.
- One study found the presence of symptoms of complicated grief among substance use disorder patients was 34.2% in comparison to 5% in the control group.



Dr. Serena King

These were just some of the startling statistics and valuable information that was presented at the 41st MCDES conference, which was held on May 4th in Brooklyn Center. Chris Lewis, MCDES Board Member, opened the conference by extending a warm welcome to all 175 attendees and Board Member Ed Holland led us in a time of quiet reflection beginning with wise words from Winnie the Pooh and ending with a responsive litany, as “we remember them.”

MCDES Board Member, Tim Thorpe, offered an introduction to our esteemed keynote speaker, Serena King, Ph.D., who is a clinical psychologist, professor and researcher in the areas of addiction, gambling, and physical and psychological health issues. Dr. King began her presentation with a personal story of a friend and colleague who lost her life to addiction. It was a powerful reminder that addiction takes lives and does not discriminate. This was a helpful way to set the tone for the presentation, as we explored the neurobiology of addiction, factors that impact the onset of addiction, and interventions and techniques to reduce relapse and continued addiction. Dr. King reported that the neurobiology is the same for drugs, alcohol, sex, gambling, and food. She noted, “All kinds of behaviors can become addictive.”

In considering what makes something addictive, it's important to note that avoiding pain can often be at the core of trying drugs or something else addictive. Certain personality traits, such as impulsivity, being extroverted, or neuroticism may increase the risk of addiction, along with genetics/biology, and experiences or environment, including trauma, sudden loss or grief. In addition, the

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community at large frequently does not often recognize or acknowledge behavioral addictions, such as gambling or anything that alters the brain, as much as it does for addictions in which a substance is injected.

Opioid Epidemic

The opioid epidemic was discussed at length. In a world where human social connections are so important, the use of opioids can trigger these same powerful social connection cues in the brain. These feelings can mimic a maternal response akin to warmth, calmness, and peacefulness in the brain, which is usually associated with a release of oxytocin known for parent/child bonding. People who use opioids often report a feeling of being nurtured or loved. It is interesting to note that physical and social pain have similar undertones and biological similarities in terms of the parts of the brain that are impacted. Dr. King discussed techniques to address these issues,

including teaching delayed gratification, identifying what is important in the person's life, developing healthy practices in other areas of life, engaging stress management tools, such as mindfulness and breathing techniques, and utilizing psychiatric medications for drug addictions.

Addiction and Grief

The second half of the morning focused on how grief impacts addiction and how addiction impacts grief. Dr. King reported that there is limited research in this area, noting that intersection of grief and addiction impacts many individuals in a variety of ways. For example, a person struggling with addiction may be at a higher risk for other health issues, including cancer or other illnesses. In addition, grief and addiction impact family members and friends of an addicted person, professionals, caregivers, medical teams, and others. Ethical issues may arise, as it relates to end-of-life care and decisions, as well as perceptions from the community at large related to

pain management when dealing with grief and addiction. Dr. King noted that there has been a paradigm shift when it comes to pain management, which may be due to recent trends related to marijuana as it relates to pain management, the use of other medications, and trends in tracking opioid prescriptions. Research statistics indicate that opiate overdoses are on the rise with heroin being the most dramatic increase. At the same time, there has also been an increase in suicide rates.

Case Examples

Several case examples, submitted by MCDES members, were discussed to explore some of the ways in which addiction and grief/loss intersect and overlap. Dr. King challenged us to consider how our own agencies or professional practices address or fail to address these issues. Addiction-related death is often viewed as an "avoidable" death, which leads to judgment from society, grief may be devalued, and shame and guilt may increase for family members as a result. Grief may also be complicated due to strained relationships prior to death or due to cultural stigma around addiction. Dr. King cited a study that noted, "The presence of symptoms of complicated grief among substance use disorder patients was 34.2% in comparison to

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MCDES Board Member Ed Holland with scholarship winners: Heidi Lepisto, Bonnie Engen, Rebecca Long



Ted Bowman and Serena King

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5% in the control group.” Addiction itself can create its own sense of grief. Dr. King discussed treatment modalities, support groups and interventions to address addiction and grief/loss.

Personal Story

As the afternoon session began, Ted Bowman, MDiv, graciously shared his own personal connection to addiction and grief/loss. Ted is an educator, author, consultant, and active MCDES member. “Stories invite stories,” Ted began. He described the depth of his grief journey after the death of his grandson in April 2017 due to an opioid addiction and subsequent overdose. With poignant, honest, and artful reflections, Ted shared selections from his year of writing his grief. His words captivated the audience with rapt attention as we entered his world of agonizing grief and intensive love for his beloved grandson. Ted encouraged us to share our own stories and be bold in finding ways to share these stories in an effort to create a cultural shift in talking about this important topic.

Following Ted’s moving and powerful reflections, Dr. King returned to facilitate an open discussion on the intersection of addition and grief. Attendees broke into small groups to share with each other themes they have encountered in their professional work and the challenges or opportunities that arise out of these experiences. Case examples from attendees were presented and the following topics were addressed during a large group discussion: shame and stigma, setting boundaries versus co-dependency, how chronic addiction versus casual substance use impacts traumatic loss/grief, the need for a comprehensive resource list for families, and a need for professionals to be well versed in both addition and grief/loss. Dr. King challenged us to be both non-

judgmental and compassionate in our stance toward those struggling with these issues.

Closing

The final session of the day focused on prevention, assessment, and treatment of addiction. Dr. King stressed the importance of utilizing a purpose-driven substance use assessment with the intent to better understand the circumstances around a person’s use and to identify if grief or loss may be a contributing factor to substance use. In addition, addiction-related loss and grief may be more difficult to overcome “due to the nature of the loss, trauma, stigma, and isolation of family.” Compassionate care and techniques from Motivational Interviewing can be helpful in working with those dealing with addiction or grief and loss. Risk factors and protective measures were discussed with audience participation, as well as pharmacological interventions and evidenced-based therapies to address addiction.

Throughout the conference, Dr. King presented a wealth of information in an engaging way that was both informative and easy to understand. Discussions around addiction and current research, particularly with regard to the recent opioid epidemic and the impact of grief and loss, were insightful and relevant. She urged us to consider how our own experiences have shaped and informed us as practitioners, as well as how this current research and new understanding may inform our practice into the future.

As a recipient of the Dorothy Geis Scholarship, I am grateful to the MCDES Board of Directors and to those individuals that have contributed to this fund for the opportunity to attend this important conference and engage in meaningful conversations with others on such a worthy and relevant topic as addition and grief.

Editor’s Note: Rebecca Long, MSW, LICSW, has several years of work experience in the mental health field. She is currently a stay-at-home mom with plans to return to the paid workforce in the fall when her youngest child begins school. Rebecca feels most at peace when she is in nature and this time of year she enjoys gardening, browsing farmer’s markets, hiking, biking, and camping with her family.

Final Note—From the Editor

Due to speaking and travel commitments, Ben was unable to attend the Spring conference. This was only his second absence at a MCDES educational offering in 38 years! Bravely, board member Chris Lewis volunteered to be our “Ben-for-the-day.” Considering all the duties Ben tackles on conference day, this was no small item. But Chris’s attention to detail, organization and introductions helped make the day a success. She also helped everyone miss Ben a little less, prompting applause and laughter, when she placed a perfect “Ben on a stick” over her face and asked, “What do we always have for lunch?” Maybe we should tell Ben, since he was gone, this time, in his honor, we did have lobster and chocolate! Just kidding, Ben! We had chicken...and we missed you! Thanks, Chris!

