

## Medical Student Led Grief & Loss Support Group

Medical School is full of surprises. In a field where science is so heavily emphasized, I found the people, relationships and interactions to be the most puzzling concepts. My goal upon entry was to attempt to get to know each and every one of my classmates on a personal level. I knew the science would happen. Perhaps this was to prove to the rest of the world that medical students are not as crazy as the public may think. Or perhaps it was to prove that they in fact are! Regardless, what I pieced together after almost four years is that almost every medical student has a significant amount of the B word: Baggage. Many students enter with baggage and others pile up baggage while in school. Although this 'baggage' can be categorized very differently, the subcategory I was most intrigued by is that of loss and how students grieve during medical school.

What I hope to propose and promote is the success, or even necessity of a medical student peer to peer support group devoid of faculty/administrative presence. A grief and loss support group organized and led entirely by students. The group provides a safe space for students to grieve, connect and support one another.

Shortly after starting medical school, I found my brother's death and fall out thereof creeping back into my life. The cyclic grief and unresolved sadness seemed not only to persist but to be exacerbated by the stress and intensity of medical school. In class, we were constantly learning the pathophysiology about life and death. In the clinic, we were surrounded by patients who were going through the process. Outside of school, we were reliving our loss every day. There was no escape. Meanwhile, there was rarely time or space for reflection and organization of real life distractions. Making sense of everything, especially death, seemed impossible at times.

After sharing my struggles with our Dean, she directed me to GWU's student initiated and student led grief and loss support group. The group was designed for students who experienced a loss before or during medical school, and to provide a space for students to grieve and bond in a small understanding community. I began attending every monthly gathering and eventually co-leading the group during my third and fourth year of medical school. This was really the only time I could honor, celebrate and think about my brother during school guilt free.

Our group met once per month with the premise that gatherings were open to every medical student grieving. I learned things about my classmates that amazed, inspired, and deeply saddened me. Many of my classmates lost parents before or during medical school. Some lost siblings and best friends. Some individuals attended three years after their loss, and others needed the support acutely. Regardless, for those students courageous enough to attend, sometimes this was their first step towards help.

Each monthly gathering was unique in that I never knew what or who to expect. Some sessions were full of tears and emotional explosions. One individual's

testimony could cause the entire room to fall apart. The realization for most is that someone else gets it. In a world where it seems like no one else could possibly understand your sadness, someone, moreover someone in your medical school class could understand grief so clearly and intimately.

It's clear that there is a demand and need for a support group in medical school. I interacted with at least 40 different students throughout my four years. This is an astronomical number. I worry where these students would have gone without such a group. The benefit of the group is not what happens at gatherings but what happens in between. Whether students come once or every month, they build relationships with peers who they can depend on. What is often overlooked post-death is the fall out. The always present 'complications'. Grieving the person you lost in addition to dealing with the sadness left behind. Financial stressors with a single income, bankruptcy, siblings grieving who turn to unhealthy behaviors, single parents grieving who can no longer provide parental support. Did I make the right decision when my family relied on me to make medical decisions because I'm a 'medical student'? What do I do with my time now that I'm no longer a primary care giver? The idea of normal drastically changes. Parents move, decisions to get rid of your loved ones belongings. Do I take a year off? Can I afford to financially, mentally, emotionally? What will I do? Did I make a mistake going to medical school when I should have been by my mom's side? Should I move out of my parents house? Can I afford therapy? When can I attend therapy sessions if I only have 4 days off during my clinical rotations? What will I do when I'm treating a patient with the same illness that plagued by father? What if I fall apart on rounds? The complications are endless.

This group does not provide the answer to any of these complex and difficult questions. But it provides a space for students to question and grieve together in a private setting. It creates a shared bond. It can help students get from one day to the next. This group gives students an option. A first step. And from this step, hopefully many more to follow.