



Online support following a death in the Armed Forces

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In the last issue of Bereavement Care (Summer 2009) there was an interesting article by Paul Cawkill, senior psychologist to the Ministry of Defence, which looked at casualty notification and bereavement support in the UK military. Searching the internet for useful resources to help those bereaved by the death of someone serving in the Armed Forces and those who work with them, I was pleased to find several very good quality websites. One such is the UK-based site Military Families Support Group, at www.mfsg.org.uk. This site was founded by Susan Smith, whose son was killed in Iraq in 2005. Its intention is to offer 'help, support, information and guidance for anyone who has suffered the loss of a loved one while serving with the UK Armed Forces'. It also offers help and support to injured and traumatised servicemen and women and their families. Once registered with the site, the bereaved can create a permanent online memorial by adding their own webpage dedicated not only to mourning their loss but also celebrating the life of their loved one (see the In Memory section). The Links and Resources section provides easy access to some very useful websites, including that of the Forces Children's Trust, a charity devoted to helping dependent children who have lost a parent in the Armed Forces, and the Forces Poetry website, which encourages submissions from those serving and from the bereaved.

Click on Help, Support and Advice and you are taken to a very useful list including Aspals Legal Pages (www.aspals.com), which lists legal firms specialising in military cases and international law. Also listed here is www.holidays4heroes.org, which provides holidays and assistance for the families of injured personnel and also for military widows and their families. From this section you can also access www.victimsvoice.co.uk, an umbrella charity that helps with issues that may arise when people are bereaved by sudden, traumatic death and have to cope with the involvement of police, coroner, mortuaries, hospitals and courts.

Click on Information and Leaflets and you will find a link to a 20-page report by the Ministry of Defence titled Boards of Inquiry and Coroner's Inquests – Information for Bereaved Families. From here you can also access www.disasteraction.org.uk, which provides a number of excellent leaflets for distribution

to survivors of and those bereaved by major disasters. All are free to download in Microsoft Word, Adobe PDF or in printer-friendly format. There are leaflets on 'The Immediate Aftermath', 'Injury or Death Overseas', 'The Return of Personal Property', and more. An excellent leaflet of particular interest to those working with the bereaved is 'Guidelines for Interviews'. All these leaflets were written by survivors and those bereaved by disasters, including 9/11, the Kings Cross fire, the Lockerbie crash, the Dunblane shootings, the 2006 Boxing Day tsunami and the Sharm El Sheikh bombings.

The site also includes a well-used Forum offering support and advice as well as enabling users to talk to each other about generally related topics, and a News section with up-to-date information. The site has a clearly stated privacy policy to protect its users and the organisation can be contacted by mail, email and phone.

Cruse, the UK's main bereavement support charity, recently launched a special Armed Forces Project to improve support for bereaved service families and dependants. A section of the recently relaunched Cruse website (www.cruse.org.uk) is devoted to the needs of those bereaved by a death (by whatever cause) in the UK Armed Forces, and lists a wide array of links to services and support, including Cruse's own network of volunteer support services across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The site was still being built as we went to press but, given Cruse's 50 years of experience in working with the bereaved, it will be well worth a visit.

One of the best US-based websites is that of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (known as TAPS), at www.taps.org – America's 'front line resource' for all who are grieving the death of a loved one serving in the Armed Forces. The website is part of a comprehensive package of support, advice, information and counselling offered by the organisation and its professional network. Services for the bereaved include the Taps Peer Support Network, which provides 'various levels of support and interaction 24 hours a day, 7 days a week'. You can request a peer mentor by emailing the website. Mentors will provide one-on-one support either by telephone, email or through

personal visits, as requested. All mentors are required to undergo online training and classroom training.

The website's Grief Support Services section includes access to a number of peer chat groups (click Online Community). Currently there are separate groups for parents, siblings, fiancés/fiancées, widows/widowers and 'battle buddies'. In all groups, members are free to choose their own level of participation and can opt out of membership at any time.

Also accessed via the Grief Support Services button is the TAPS professional education and online training for counsellors, social workers, chaplains, nurses and mental health professionals. This is delivered in the form of webinars (web-based seminars) – interactive presentations, lectures and workshops on grief and trauma, given by invited expert speakers. You can sign up to a mailing list to receive further information. Help for those wanting to register for these online training sessions can be found in the FAQs section.

Also on this section of the site are details of bereavement support groups available across the US, and of the TAPS seminars for people bereaved by suicide in the Armed Forces, and its Good Grief Camps, where bereaved children and teenagers share their grief, learn new coping skills and identify and establish support systems.

The Resources to Comfort/Help section links you to the TAPS Magazine. Written by professional caregivers and the bereaved, this quarterly publication is free to the bereaved, service members and professionals working with US military survivors, and you can register online to receive a copy.

Here too you can find the Survivor Care Package, including information on the grief process, which can be downloaded from the website free of charge.

This useful resource includes a section on Children's Response to Trauma, which lists some common responses to traumatic bereavement in children at various key ages and stages. You can also download the 26-page Survivor's Guide to Benefits from the

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DOD (Department of Defense) Survivor Guide section, which includes advice on funeral and memorial services, money matters and additional resources.

This section of the site also gives information about possible help from the Dependents' Educational Assistance program, which provides education and training to eligible dependents of certain veterans. Details can be obtained by emailing the website. Finally, the site provides links to external counselling services and a good number of excellent websites and useful organisations for the bereaved and for professionals.

With so many deaths currently occurring among NATO Armed Forces personnel, particularly in Afghanistan, sites such as these are an invaluable, accessible source of and link to peer and professional support for people with very distinct and special bereavement care needs. ■

Webwatch editor

Sadly, this is Amanda Aitken's last Webwatch. We will all sorely miss her illuminating and insightful contributions to the journal. And we need a new Webwatch editor. If you are interested in writing the column, please contact Catherine Jackson, with examples of your written work and some suggestions for how you might develop the content. We cannot pay a fee but the Webwatch editor will receive complimentary copies of the journal and free online access. Deadline for submissions 2 January 2010. Contact: catherine.jackson@cruse.org.uk