

## Men in the kitchen: distress, anxiety and depression. Evidence from three bereavement programs for men

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Anna Petterson was appointed Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the SolarisCare Foundation; in October 2008, following the award of her PhD, an interdisciplinary study of art therapy and ovarian cancer. Anna is a medical art psychotherapist and has a particular interest in art as a therapeutic tool.

Previously Anna worked part time, as art therapist on the Palliative Care Unit of Hollywood Private Hospital. Anna's research specialises the use of complementary therapies addressing issues of grief and loss and psycho-oncology, especially the trauma associated with a diagnosis of a life-limiting illness.

Anna has held numerous leadership roles in government and non-government organisations, both state, national and international, including the United Nations and International Red Cross.

Currently Anna is building the research profile and research team at SolarisCare and is actively engaged in national and international collaborative research projects. A number of publications are currently being prepared. Anna and the SolarisCare research team are in the process of creating innovative research projects in all of the therapies offered through the SolarisCare Cancer Support Centres.

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### Significance

Making and finding meaning from the experience of loss is an oscillatory process and different for each bereaved individual. Following the death of a partner, men must cope with many new environmental demands and learn new skills. Attention should be paid to widowers' underlying mechanisms relevant to the restoration process, identity change, and the ways in which the adjustment process can be improved. Restoration-oriented bereavement support as identified in the dual process model of bereavement was the premise underlying the Men in the Kitchen program. Although social support cannot compensate for the loss of a spouse, those with social support have higher levels of wellbeing and satisfaction. An investigation of widowers in Australia concluded that intrinsic to men's adaptation to widowhood and successful ageing is their success in retaining, maintaining and making friends. A review of the literature affirms that when researchers assessed widows and widowers, they confirmed a negative relationship between social support and depression levels, especially among widowers in the acute grieving period. There is a paucity of studies addressing the needs of widowers during their first year/eighteen months of bereavement especially those in rural areas and the effectiveness of interventions to address these issues. This project will begin to address that gap in the literature.

### Background

Men in the Kitchen is a program run by SolarisCare for men aged under 60 years who are recently bereaved. The aim of this program is to provide men with social support at this difficult time, as well as impart practical cooking skills, which are useful as they begin to rebuild their lives following the death of their partner. The six-week program has a semi-structured format that includes cooking demonstrations, discussions about meal planning and preparation and provides for social time when the participants can chat. Three programs were conducted during 2010. A pilot evaluation of Men in the Kitchen found that men attending the program reported increased social support and a decreased sense of isolation as well as providing a safe place to vent emotions and build empathy were important factors for participants. This project will provide valuable information about the issues that confront recently bereaved men, especially rural men, that is currently not well documented in the literature.

### Methods

A mixed-method approach was employed. Quantitative data was generated using a repeated measures time series design, with participants being asked to complete a questionnaire at three time points that evaluates psychological wellbeing and day-to-day functioning. The small sample size and the need for rich descriptive data about men's experiences suggest that a qualitative component to the study added depth. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted to explore issues specific to this group of bereaved men, including support and information needs and their vulnerability to depression.

Surveys consisted of demographic questions and the ten-item Bradburn Affect Balance Scale (MOOD) survey, which is a reliable/validated instrument that measures men's psychological wellbeing and day-to-day functioning. This scale was short and easy to complete, appropriate for the target group and provided the research team with three scores: a positive affect score, a negative affect score and an affect balance score.

### **Outcomes**

Analysis of the qualitative data from widowers, especially those with dependent children and those from rural areas will provide information to improve, guide and plan future bereavement services for men. It is important to determine if the current format meets the needs of the participants, contributes to improving the psychological wellbeing of participants, increasing their social support and decreasing their sense of isolation.

### **Conclusion and recommendations**

Publication of the results of this program will support the delivery of similar programs for bereaved men and provide the basis for further research in this area.