

Co-ordinating mental health care for people experiencing suicide bereavement

Daryl, a 38-year-old, married father of two children took his own life.

Background

Melissa and Daryl had been together since high school and had two children, Ben, aged six, and Madeline, aged four.

Daryl owned a plumbing business. Melissa worked part-time in a fashion store, and also helped Daryl with the books for the business. The business had been running for ten years and Daryl had always been very busy, with no financial worries.

However, over the past 12 months, Daryl's business had slowed down significantly. Daryl struggled to have more than two weeks of work booked in, and sometimes had no work for a month. Daryl and Melissa's personal bills and mortgage began to fall behind and they both began to feel financial stress, as debt collectors called them constantly. Daryl felt the stress more than Melissa, as he saw it as his responsibility to support the family.

Daryl began to feel like a failure and his mood was very low. Whenever Melissa tried to talk to him about his feelings, Daryl snapped at her and said, "I don't want to talk about it". To avoid conflict, Melissa stopped mentioning their financial situation or offering suggestions to help.

Aside from the financial stress, their daily life seemed normal from the outside, with the kids going to kindergarten and school, and the occasional gathering with friends and family. In previous years, they had gone on regular camping trips with friends, but they missed the last two trips due to financial reasons. However, Daryl was very proud and told his friends that they were too busy with work commitments to go camping.

Two months ago, Melissa noticed that Daryl was drinking every night and becoming more withdrawn. Melissa became concerned and tried to insist that Daryl see a counsellor or a GP. Daryl refused and said, "It's a waste of my time. I'm better off looking for more work. I'm okay, we'll get through this, it's just a rough patch".

A week later, Melissa came home from work, after picking the children up from after-school care. She made the children a snack, and then went to find Daryl to tell him about something that was happening with a friend at work. She couldn't find him inside, so ventured out to the garage where Daryl often spent time. When she opened the door, she found Daryl hanging from the ceiling. She panicked and ran back into the house to ring 000 for help. The paramedics arrived quickly and confirmed that Daryl had died.

Current situation

It is one month since Daryl's passing, and Melissa is really struggling with the fact that her husband is no longer with her and their children. The funeral was extremely difficult as she was in a state of shock and disbelief, and the children were very grief stricken.

Melissa feels that the last month has been a blur, very surreal, and she has been operating like she is on autopilot. At night, she lies awake with thoughts and questions like, "What did I do wrong? Why did he do this to me? Who can I talk to now? Who will help me with the kids and the bills? I'll never be able to do this alone."

Melissa also often thinks that she should have known something was wrong with Daryl. She's not eating well, she's losing weight and finding it difficult to sleep. She regularly wakes from dreams about finding Daryl. When she lies awake, she constantly thinks about what she could have done to help Daryl and stop him from taking his own life.

Initially, Melissa took a few weeks off work, but she had to return for financial reasons. Work is very difficult as she deals with people who know her and she is unable to explain what happened. She doesn't want to talk to people about it, as she feels ashamed of what he did. People look away when she is at the

children's school, and her friends text her but don't drop in. Melissa feels very alone and confused.

Melissa always had a good relationship with Daryl's parents, but lately it feels strained. She suspects they think she could have been able to do something to prevent Daryl's death. The only person Melissa can talk to is her close friend Karen. However, although Karen is very kind and caring, she has not lived through the same experience and doesn't seem to understand what Melissa is feeling.

Ben has always been a kind and gentle boy, but lately he has been lashing out at his little sister. He has become withdrawn, and often says he feels sick and doesn't want to go to school. Melissa is regularly in touch with Ben's teacher and they discuss strategies to help Ben. Ben frequently wakes at night after nightmares, and wants to sleep in his mum's bed. He often asks Melissa if she is going to die too, and who will look after him and his sister. When Ben is having a good day he tries so hard to help Melissa and calls himself "the big boy of the house now".

When Melissa initially explained to the children what happened to Daryl, she told the children that "Daddy has gone to heaven and won't be coming home anymore". Melissa often finds Madeline sitting quietly in her bedroom playing make-believe games, where one of the characters is her Daddy. One day, Melissa listened outside Madeline's bedroom door and heard her saying to one of the dolls, "Why don't you come home from heaven now, Daddy? We miss you". This was followed by crying. Melissa went into the room and gave her a cuddle, but didn't know what else to do. She is struggling with what to say to the children when they are distressed. She finds herself saying the same thing to them; "We'll be okay without Daddy".

Melissa is still quite concerned about her children and, after talking to her friend Karen, they both decide it might be a good idea for Melissa to see a GP to seek psychological support for herself and the children.