

Paper – Seasons for Growth – You don't have to grieve alone.

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About Seasons for Growth

'*Seasons for Growth*' is an educational, small group, peer support program which focuses on managing change, loss and grief.

Developed by the MacKillop Foundation, the coordination of the program in the Hunter is funded by the Catholic Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle. It is not however a religious program, and, in the Young People's program, each lesson is matched to school curriculum across Australia.

The program is active across Australia as well as overseas. In Australia over 100,000 individuals have accessed the program, and in the Hunter over 900 teachers, other professionals and volunteers have undertaken the training to implement the program in schools and community agencies in our region.

Initially developed to assist children and young people, Seasons for Growth is now also available for adults who have experienced loss. The program enhances resilience and offers a safe environment where participants are able to access information, and to develop skills in communication and problem solving. These skills help to deal with current and future change situations. Most importantly, Seasons for Growth, breaks the isolation of grieving alone.

We receive feedback from across the Hunter. Young people and adults frequently write:

- *I found out I was not the only one.*
- *I found out I am not alone.*

Movingly many children also write:

- *I found out I was not to blame.*

Grief literature identifies that children often think they are to blame for a *death* in the family. Our work has also identified that many children and young people also consider they are to blame for a *family break-up*. (Over 90% of children and young people accessing this program identify *family break-up* as their significant change issue).

The Commonwealth Government's National Evaluation (1999) of the Seasons for Growth program stated that:

'Seasons for Growth focuses on understanding the effects of change, loss and grief, and specifically develops skills in communication, decision-making and problem solving. The program has a sound curriculum structure and utilises a wide range of creative learning activities'.

Positive evaluations have also been carried out by the South Australian Community and Health Research Unit [2004] and the University of Melbourne [2005].

The modules for children and young people have five levels, and these accommodate different developmental stages. This means that if they wish to do so, children and young people are able to re-join a Seasons for Growth group as they mature, or as circumstances change. The modules for children and young people consist of:

- Level 01: 6 - 8 years
- Level 02: 9 - 10 years
- Level 03: 11 – 12 years
- Level 04: 13 – 15 years
- Level 05: 16 – 18 years

The modules for adults include:

- Component 1: Seasons for Growth Parent/Carer Information Session
- Component 2: Understanding Change, Loss and Grief – A two hour workshop.
- Component 3: Exploring the Seasons of Grief – four two hour sessions for those who want to continue a more personal exploration. This can be offered over a four week period, or run over two days.

As well as death, and family break-up, in the Hunter we are also seeing loss of a pet, diagnosis of an illness or life-threatening condition for a family member, having a family member in prison, changing schools [especially moving on from primary to high school], and even drought as the named significant loss issue for young participants.

In Seasons for Growth a facilitator (usually a teacher who when running the group is known as a ‘Companion’) works with small groups of young people or adults to help them understand and express their experiences of change and loss. The program draws from Worden’s writing, but uses the metaphor of the *Seasons* to provide a common and meaningful language. Participants are able to discuss a particular individual loss and to understand that it is normal to experience and express a range of emotions. A positive space is created where current beliefs can be reviewed, and where realistic and positive plans for the future are developed. In such a setting hope flourishes.

While the ideas of Worden (1982, 1991, 1996) are used throughout the program and then linked to the metaphor of the *Seasons*, the work of other writers (for example Doka, K and Davidson 1998, J, McKissock D 1998, Geldard, K and Geldard 2001, D, the Dougy Center 2000, Dowling, G 1986, Raphael, B 1985, and so on), have been incorporated in the program, along with educational and group-work theories.

Significantly the four ‘tasks’ of grieving (articulated by Worden) are linked in a continuous circle to the four Seasons [See diagram following this text]. The more technical language of Worden is softened by user-friendly seasonal imagery. Significantly the seemingly linear, prescriptive nature of Worden’s tasks is re-imaged as a *cyclical* process. Individuals are recognised as experts in their own story who

may re-visit different Seasons, and move forwards (or backwards) through Seasons at their own pace.

Meaning making and story:

While Worden's tasks provide the structure for the group activities, the real dynamic going on in the group is *meaning making* through the valuing of *personal story*. The imagery of Seasons allows for individual as well as shared meaning-making, and in this way the program sits well with writers such as Neimeyer. *Connectedness*, found in the literature to be so important in fostering resilience, is actively promoted in the small group sessions.

In the Hunter we are finding the very non-threatening two-three hour Component 2 – *Understanding Change, Loss and Grief* works particularly well with families and community groups as well as with staff working in teaching, health or welfare. We also find parents of children in the program want to access the Component 3 (4x2 hour), as do other adults who have experienced loss, and we offer this regularly over two days.

Each individual is unique and will grieve in his or her own way and at his or her own pace. This can mean that in situations of change and loss family members and close friends may be unavailable to nurture each other. A lack of understanding about the processes of loss and grief can compound relationship difficulties at these times. The provision of information, education and support to parents as well as children are vital strategies to promote healing and strengthen bonds.

Change and loss are a constant part of life. The experience of grief in association with change is therefore also a part of life. The Seasons for Growth program is useful as a framework for understanding multiple change and loss events.

A universal metaphor breaking isolation:

Most importantly, Seasons for Growth helps to break the isolation, predominant in our individualistic society, of having *to grieve alone*.

There has been a tendency in our 'quick-fix' Western society to shy away from the topic of grief. Dealing with great sadness in our own lives can be extremely difficult. We can also feel quite helpless as we witness the pain and distress of others. In addition, the grief of others can remind us of our own vulnerability to loss. Because of such factors many forms of grief remain *unacknowledged*, and individuals and families can be *left alone* without adequate support. Finding an acceptable and non-threatening way to discuss grief and loss is important.

The metaphor of the Seasons provides a common language that is not prescriptive. We all experience the Seasons, but we can experience the Seasons in different ways. And we can grieve together, even though our losses are individual and unique.

The adult program:

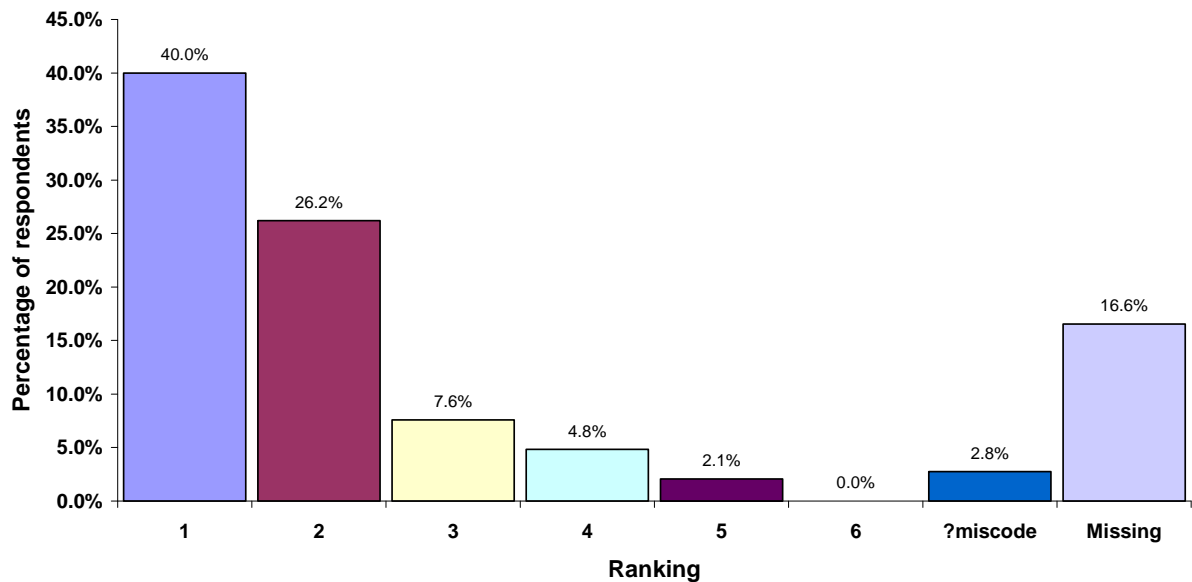
Previous formal evaluations have focused on the Young People's program. In the Hunter, we have also been analyzing feedback from the Adult program. In a recent study, we examined the feedback from the Seasons for Growth adult components when used as part of a professional development strategy for people volunteering to work with others in community settings.

Both quantitative and qualitative data was analyzed. See below.

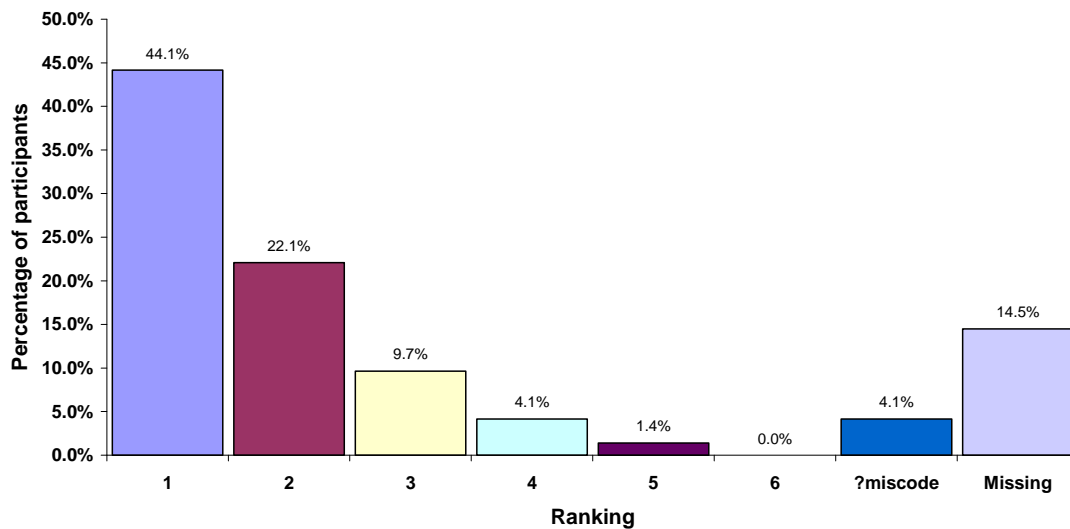
1 = 'Completely' 6 = 'Not at all'

To what extent did you find this program helpful?

Components 2 and 3 results
n= 145 participants



How effectively were the aims and outcomes of the program achieved? [The outcomes they were given were from the manual]
 Component 2 and 3 total n=145 participants



The qualitative data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach.

Participants wrote that they gained knowledge and understanding of change, grief and loss: were able to look at their own grief: increased their understanding of others who might be grieving: and gained skills and knowledge about local resources. This feedback has confirmed for us that Seasons for Growth is not only helpful for young people and adults who personally experience grief, the program can also be used as part of core training for staff and volunteers who work with people in a number of institutional or community settings.

Significantly a large number of participants indicated that they had found the *group process* itself positive. Some typical comments are listed below:

- *Loved the group and the sharing*
- *Safety of the group*
- *You might feel a bit uncomfortable at first – but it won't last.*
- *Openness, honesty and support of group members.*
- *Depth of trust*
- *Life, love and laughter in the program.*
- *The interaction within the group*

Through the group conversations many participants appear to have discovered they were not alone and enjoyed hearing the stories of others. Some participants also identified that they had now found a new network of support. This suggests that Seasons for Growth components can help to break isolation.

Detailed information about Seasons for Growth can also be found on the Maitland-Newcastle website at www.mn.catholic.org.au/diocesan/seasons.htm. Information is also available on the National Office of Seasons for Growth, Good Grief, at www.goodgrief.org.au

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The dynamics of Seasons for Growth in an educational and group context:

