

CARERS MENTAL HEALTH PROJECT

SEASONS FOR GROWTH PROGRAM EVALUATION (SUMMARY)

Seasons for Growth was not originally part of the **Carers Mental Health Project**, but was identified as a **potentially effective means for helping carers deal with the long-term loss and grief that go with caring for a person with a mental illness/disorder**. An important message was given: that carers' experiences differ vastly and carers would have quite different needs depending on their individual situations.

The **Carers Mental Health Project** evaluation of **Seasons for Growth** focussed on:

- what participants wanted from the program
- what they felt they got out of the program
- satisfaction with a number of aspects of the program and
- the impact on their relationships with the consumer [person being cared for] and other family members.

The evaluation includes:

- suggested improvements to the program
- key challenges and issues for program delivery and
- a summary and set of recommendations.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

Carers wanted coping skills, reassurance, personal development, a focus on grief and loss and wanted to gain a measure of peace: Comments from participants:

- *Peace of mind*
- *I hope to learn ways of coping differently to life's challenges so I can maintain an inner peace and to be supportive of others at work and at home and not burn out*
- *More inner peace and inner strength*
- *Reassurance, knowledge, understanding, improved self-confidence*
- *Personal and emotional resources to live in **ongoing state of grief and loss***

Outcomes

The results were almost unanimously positive, with some participants wanting a longer program, and some saying the program wasn't what they expected. By the end of the program, participants reported significantly lower levels of tension in their relationship with the person being cared for. As one carer said, "**overall, I feel more competent, therefore more confident and this is already benefiting my family.**"

Several key benefits to the program were cited: becoming more in touch with their feelings, confronting painful issues/dealing with grief and loss, and learning how to cope better. The most important thing they learned centred around **forgiving themselves, letting go, and "not beating myself up" over not being perfect.**

Participants were asked what they found most difficult about the program. Responses nearly all centred on feeling vulnerable and facing difficult emotional issues:

- *The most difficult part of this program for me was to get in touch with my feelings, and realising that I hadn't let go of some painful experiences*
- *To own up to what I was doing- to accept that it is "I" who can change – I am in control of my life – not anyone else*
- *Facing emotional issues and feelings I didn't know were there*
- *To relate my deepest personal thoughts*
- *Learning to let go of my past and focus on myself and my future*

Overall, participants found the program worthwhile. ***“It was all great – it changed my way of life – to be a better person in myself.”***

The evaluation confirmed the need to ensure a safe environment within which carers can acknowledge their vulnerability and feel comfortable enough to share their emotional experiences. It also stressed that the facilitator needs to have proper skills and training, and be well supported.

Suggested Improvements

Suggestions from the participants included:

- *More practice/discussions of how to tactfully broach sensitive topics with others*
- *Maybe a physical action during each session as a release*
- *Within the small group, time for each person could have been shared better*
- *More exercise within the group relating to getting in touch with their feelings. It is a difficult process which we have detached from a long time ago.*

Key Challenges/Issues for Program Delivery

1. **Ensuring that participants are “ready” for the program** – facilitator needed to spend a great deal of time with potential participants making sure they understood and were prepared for what could happen in the program.
2. **Program Delivery** – it was essential that a safe environment for the carers was established; this required a great deal of skill. It was critical that the facilitator was aware that some of the carers themselves may be suffering from depression and needed to be linked in with appropriate services. The facilitator may themselves have been a carer and there was a duty of care to ensure that the facilitator had appropriate support and was able to keep an appropriate level of emotional detachment. **In addition, the facilitator has to have dealt with his/her own grief and loss issues.**
3. **Co-facilitation** – the program structure – one main facilitator plus companions was found to be a good structure. Negotiating agreed-upon roles and boundaries for each is critical to the program’s success.
4. **Post program issues** – participants will often want to continue meeting as a group, and may want assistance from the facilitator to help make that happen.

SUMMARY/RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SEASONS FOR GROWTH PROGRAM

- The ***Seasons for Growth*** program met its goals of helping participants to recognise and come to terms with grief and loss, and participants were generally satisfied with both the program and the facilitator. By the end of the program, levels of tension in their relationship with the consumer [person being cared for] had decreased significantly.
- While it had similarities to the *8 Stages* program, the focus and process are slightly different. Ideally, ***Seasons for Growth*** should be seen as an intermediate course between the *14 Principles* and the *8 Stages*.
- **The focus on acknowledging and accepting all forms of grief and loss, not just those related to the mental illness/disorder, and increasing emotional awareness, are two of the mechanisms which help the *Seasons for Growth* program work well.**
- Suggested improvements include trying to ensure a gender balance, ensuring that non-English speakers are well-supported, and increasing emphasis on how to open up emotionally and discuss difficult issues with others.
- It is important for facilitators to have strong group work skills.
- Appropriate levels of clinical supervision and support need to be provided to the facilitator.

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Longitudinal Follow-up Report – *Seasons for Growth* program (SUMMARY)

15 of the original 24 carers participated in the follow-up – the findings demonstrate that **the program was effective in the long-term at meeting the goals of helping carers deal with grief and loss issues**

OVERALL BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN THE SEASONS FOR GROWTH PROGRAM

Carers felt that participating in the *Seasons for Growth* program had a positive impact on nine out of ten areas, including personal well-being, accessing services, and relationships (with the exception of relationships with mental health professionals – this was not an emphasis of the course though).

Post-course behaviour

100% recommended the program to other carers, 73.3% discussed content with other people, 85.7% tried to apply their learning from the course, 61.5% of partners have completed the course, 64.3% kept in contact with facilitator, 73.3% kept in touch with participants.

Most Important things learned/taken away from the *Seasons for Growth* program

- How to work through grief and loss – *“I had not grieved for past experiences in my life, letting go e.g. past and present hurt, need to work through the 4 Seasons to come to terms with loss and grief, we experience grief, adjust to it, then reinvest our emotional energy”*
- New ways of looking at situations and self awareness – *“a new understanding of myself, insight into my own feelings, see change as opportunities, new beginning, unavoidable, easy-come-easy-go: I have less anxiety and fewer expectations, maintain cheerfulness: there are always good things to identify – my attitude is everything”*
- Permission for self-care – *“I can’t be a carer if I don’t look after me, I must look after myself”*

Application of the *Seasons for Growth* material

The carers who responded to the follow-up felt they were generally able to apply what they learned to their lives.

- Facing grief and loss – *“facing my pain and fear. Letting go of hopes and dreams, our dearly loved daughter wanted no contact - we had to accept, adjust and get on with our lives. She is constantly in our thoughts though not crippling our lives, able to accept the pain (new one or old one that starts to surface, and knowing they will pass). Not going into panic mode.*
- Changing ways of relating to consumer – *“I don’t rush in and try to ‘fix’ others – I give them the room and time and gentle encouragement to do it themselves”*

Perceived Impact of Participating in *Seasons for Growth*

The positive benefits cited included a strong sense of accepting the changes that had happened in their lives and that it was the ways in which they **thought about** those changes that affected their well-being. **Self-care and knowing they were not alone were also perceived to be beneficial aspects of attending the program.**

SUMMARY

The results from the follow-up of the *Seasons for Growth* program demonstrate the importance of providing an opportunity for carers to deal specifically with the grief that accompanies mental illness, the changes that illness brings and the caring role itself. The findings suggest that **dealing with grief and loss through this program leads to long-term benefits for the participants.**

(Summarised by Benita Tait)