

## GP LINK Lunches | Katie Tunks, Griefline

**Dr Kenneth McCroary, Chair of Sydney South West GP Link, hosts a series of meetings with clinical/political/regional individuals or organisations to discuss issues and solutions for GPs working in South Western Sydney.**



Katie Tunks



Dr Ken McCroary

Ken McCroary - The COVID pandemic continues to affect all of us in a significant way it has altered our life and those around us forever essentially.

One of the significant issues we have had particularly out here in South Western Sydney has been the mortality associated with the disease particularly in our elderly population and those other locals in our community at extra risk of mortality such as those with a middle eastern background or those with increased risk with more early mortality with COVID such as our Pacific Islander communities.

Sydney South West GP Link continues to work with our at-risk communities and the wider region as well and I was recently quite impressed with the new grief line service particularly with what we have all been through over these past few years.

I thought today would be a good opportunity to talk to Katie Tunks from Griefline.

Katie brings a warm, deeply personal centred approach to her work as part of griefline's intake counselling team. Originally a volunteer, Katie is now involved with a number of programs (in particular integrating grief program in NSW and Police Line in Victoria) and spends her day supporting help seekers in both an intake and one-to-one counselling capacity. Katie is a registered counsellor with PACFA and registered trainer for living works applied suicide intervention skills training (ASIST), providing crucial first aid skills to build suicide safer communities.

**Welcome Katie and thanks so much for joining us today. Tell us a bit about Grief Line please?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes, absolutely so Griefline's mission is to normalise grief by having courageous conversations and supporting communities to grow from loss. So, we really feel passionately that grief is a normal response, you know it is something we will all face at various stages in our lives, so our aim is really to help reduce the difficult areas of talking about it and managing.

**Ken McCroary - How did Griefline come about?**

**Katie Tunks** - we have been around for a long time but the program in particular that I am here to talk to you about is actually quite a new program, so it launched earlier this year.

**Ken McCroary - And can you tell me about that?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes, absolutely so the integrating grief program is funded by the Ministry of Health in NSW and we are really lucky to be able to offer six free sessions of one-to-one counselling support, over the phone or via zoom if that is what someone prefers to anybody at any stage in the grief process.

**Ken McCroary** - **And the best way to access the service would be to what?**

**Katie Tunks** - There are two ways you can do it, you can log in online and submit a referral either for yourself or for someone else with their consent. Or I know a lot of people prefer to call and talk to one of our team while they sign up so you can also call us on 03 9087 2312. And we will talk you through it and find the right thing for you.

**Ken McCroary** - **And that phone line what are the hours that it is in operation?**

**Katie Tunks** - So that is a normal business hours phone, so 9 - 5 Monday to Friday. But we do also obviously have our helpline phone as well, that is 8am to 8pm, and that is more if you are looking for immediate grief support and you just want to talk to someone in that moment. You can visit [griefline.org.au](http://griefline.org.au)

**Ken McCroary** - **Great thanks so much for that. Now one of the triggers for getting into contact was the mental health and the grief we have had through the last couple of years during our pandemic and the changes that has made and increased demand on services and the excess deaths we have had in the community. Have you guys noticed much of a change over the last three years of the COVID pandemic?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes, absolutely we saw a huge increase in calls to our helpline and I think that is probably the most tangible difference we saw all of a sudden. But you know the way grief works is it is a much longer process so we are now also hearing stories of how their grief period was complicated by COVID you know funerals over zoom and all those sorts of parts to it as well as people who have lost someone as a result of COVID that there is a few different features to it and I think we will continue to see the impact of that as time goes by to.

**Ken McCroary** - **Yes, you are absolutely correct it is not a one off event is it these zoom funerals and the changes in the way people were farewelling their loved ones etc. so we are going to be seeing ramifications of this for some time aren't we?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes, absolutely I would say so.

**Ken McCroary** - **We are a local organisation up here in South Western Sydney are you aware of any population challenges in this part of the world or not?**

**Katie Tunks** - Look I would imagine the things you would be facing would be much the same as what everyone is facing. COVID has really challenged our own wellbeing and all aspects of the grieving experience so I wouldn't say we know anything particular about your local area as such, but we hear from people from all across Australia and through this program we have heard from people across NSW.

**Ken McCroary** - **What about the Assist and a bit more about the PACPRA program what can you tell me about those?**

**Katie Tunks** - Interesting, I assume that by the PACPRA program you are referring to griefline knowledge which is our online platform for education because we know that obviously education has a big role to play in the way as a community we learn to grieve better so grief line knowledge offers a number of different courses so we have got for example 'A Grief Informed Workplace' which helps to teach healthcare professionals not just to support their clients when they are grieving but also to support each other because we also know that workplaces are also impacted by grief we have got 'Understanding Prolonged Grief' which is a foundational course for professionals who want to learn more about long term grief responses and the risk factors. And then you mentioned ASSIST as well, so we have a number of living works trainers on our team, so we are able to offer suicide first aid intervention skills.

**Ken McCroary** - **Yes, so suicide is an ongoing significant issue as well throughout the nation and I know you have had some experience with training etc. Any comments about suicide and preventative strategies?**

**Katie Tunks** - I think we really live in the space where we support people who have lost someone to suicide as much as we support those who might be having thoughts of suicide themselves and so for us it is really about the intersection of that and we know that it is much more of a pressing concern when you have lost someone to suicide for a lot of people that is when thoughts of suicide can be aggravated themselves and so that is where we really get our passion for suicide prevention, both ends of the spectrum there.

**Ken McCroary** - **Yes, it is a different sort of grief, isn't it? Do you think or not?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes well, I would say that every grief experience is unique I don't know that there is any one person who has had the same grief experience as someone else but losing someone to suicide is certainly a very particular experience and it is something that stays with people.

**Ken McCroary** - **Yes I think that is a really good point that you have just mentioned and that is that grief is a unique experience to each individual and I think that is something that we probably forget at times and that is that everyone is different the way that they experience things, the way the deal with things can be quite different and have different impacts and affects and the individuals cant it?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes, absolutely I think what I say to clients every once and a while is that although I might have supported someone who has grieved before I have never supported you in your grief of this person and that is a grief of a particular relationship right so that no one is going to know that the way that you know that, it is a very individual experience.

**Ken McCroary** - **Counselling all these people in their time of need with grief is certainly a very rewarding experience for the clinicians involved and we are really grateful for your dedication and passion in this space, but it also can be challenging as well. Have you got any advice on personal coping strategies with us as clinicians involves with supporting people through grief?**

**Katie Tunks** - That is a very good question. I think for people supporting someone it is important to be really conscious of yourself and your own responses but also to have a good network around you. We really work hard at griefline to build spaces where conversations about grief and death and dying and those processes that are really quite stigmatised and hard to talk about are able to be talked about and so I think that is important as much for clinicians as much as it is for people that we support, yes it is about having the right network around you to support you if you do find it hard.

**Ken McCroary** - **We as an organisation, South West Sydney GP Link, we do a lot of advocacy and work for GP wellbeing but also about wellbeing for the rest of the team in the primary health space. Have you got any general advice as well for wellbeing for ourselves?**

**Katie Tunks** - You are asking for general advice on wellbeing as a human in the world?

**Ken McCroary** - **Absolutely there is not enough of it available, we need it at the moment.**

**Katie Tunks** - I absolutely agree and I have got to say you would have your own lane there as much as we do in knowing what helps people to be their healthy and most well self but I do think there is a lot to be said for the traditional things, keeping yourself active, keeping yourself connected we work a lot in the realm of loneliness as well a lot of people are quite isolated when there has been a death or a loss and we know that things like engaging with charity and supporting other people are really big protective factors for staying well yourself. But it feels odd to tell that to GPs to be honest I am sure that you would know too.

**Ken McCroary** - **Yes, GP self care like everyone it is an important issue which we probably neglect at times. They have been through a lot lately like everybody else in the last few years and so any advice is probably going to be welcomed so I appreciate your input there thank you for that.**

Katie Tunks - That's alright

**Ken McCroary** - **Now with the griefline we associate grief as a post-mortem thing for survivors correct? But I also deal a lot with day-to-day treatments of relatives, spouses, partners etc going through a form of grief whilst their loved one is still actually alive but they are going through changes with dementia or some other condition where the person the care for is really no longer here but they are being still around and with them do you guys help with that and what can you say about that issue?**

**Katie Tunks** - Yes so what I would first say is that depending on which part of our programs you are engaging with it might have limitations as to the kind of grief we are targeting with that program so the Integrating Grief Program is really designed for bereavement, but we as an organisation support all kinds of losses so what you have described there might be called a living loss where someone is still there, they are still alive but there is an aspect of loss no matter where in that dementia journey or whatever is going on.

There are also things like estrangement and loss of pets, loss of home, loss of independence you know there are a number of different grief experiences we work with on the day-to-day so if you call our helpline for example, we will support you with any kind of grief that you might be facing, and it is a much broader experience than just bereavement.

**Ken McCroary - Yes, that is very well said and thanks again. Now you mentioned loneliness as an issue with health and we do see that, and we are seeing that more with studies confirming that a lack of a network and those feelings of loneliness are associated with significant morbidity in terms of physical illness and increased mortality moving forward as well so what advice can you give us as GPs in terms of being on the lookout for loneliness and strategies.**

**Katie Tunks -** Well look we actually have a tailored program for this so we mentioned earlier a griefline knowledge and we offer a course called Addressing Loneliness which really helps to cover this in some pretty big detail so I will let it speak for itself but I would highly, highly recommend that the GPs check it out as you said loneliness is a really significant impact for people it is something that impacts all sorts of day to day life and it is increasing.

**Ken McCroary - Yes unfortunately. Now you mentioned ways to self care involving voluntary work and participation as well now if I do have GPs that are interested not in just referring but participating how can GPs become involved in Griefline is there a potential for that or not?**

**Katie Tunks -** Well yes I guess it all depends on which way GPs would like to be involved I would very much welcome a call from anyone who is just looking to contribute and working to find what the best way for that would be but we do have a large base of volunteers that support our organisation and we could not do it without them so GPs certainly could find themselves in that group of people if they wanted to support people over our helpline. The opportunities feel pretty endless there and I would just welcome anyone who is interested to give us a call we are happy to chat.

**Ken McCroary - Great thanks for that. Now GPs also at sometimes are reluctant to reach out for help and so are other members of our primary health team. Now you guys would be happy and comfortable to take calls from GPs and other members of the team as well as their patients going through bereavement is that correct?**

**Katie Tunks -** Oh, absolutely I would say we receive as many, well maybe not as many but certainly a significant number of referrals who are people themselves in the healthcare industry in some way, form or other who have been looking for our services to support someone else and have found in the process of doing so they want to engage themselves. You know as people in the healthcare world you lose people as well and there is lots of ways you experience grief in your own workplaces so I would very much encourage people to access it and I know that nurses and social workers and various other healthcare professionals already engage with our service.

**Ken McCroary - And there is no need for anyone to be concerned or timid or worried about outcomes or their profession if they are searching for some support during their grief process is there?**

**Katie Tunks - No, it is all confidential, we would never share anything.**

**Ken McCroary - Yes, which is really important for my colleagues to know there is no stigma and there is no problems with being a normal human as part of being the health professional is there.**

**Katie Tunks - No of course and yes look our team is also not immune to grief happening either, right? So we 100% understand the nervousness around seeking help when we usually support people so we understand the nervousness there but there is nothing to be nervous about it is a completely normal experience.**

**Ken McCroary - Yes and one we as a community need to talk more about and I don't know make it something that is not taboo and being kinder to each other and helping to support each other going through stages like this and with your service it think that is contributing a lot to overall health and wellbeing in the community and yes I think it is a great service and I want to thank you for chatting with us today.**

**Katie Tunks - My pleasure.**

**Ken McCroary - So, I just want to run through we can all access the service and we can all refer patients as well and you have got an online access at [griefline.org.au](https://griefline.org.au) or there is a phone number 03 9087 2312 through business hours Monday to Friday but contacts and everything is available on the website if we want to learn anymore about the services?**

**Katie Tunks - Yes absolutely.**

**Ken McCroary - Wonderful well thanks again for joining us again today I really appreciate it and yes well done with the service. I would support it and hopefully we will get some calls but not hopeful for the poor people that need your service.**

**Katie Tunks - Take care, bye**

**Remember if you're not a member of GP Link already or you would like to learn more log onto our website at <https://sswgp.link/>.**