# The Art of Inclusion Diversity Council Australia logoTranscript

## Season 2 - Episode 3 – At a loss

## *Dealing with illness and death*

### Chris Hall

Freud says the human being is incapable of understanding their mortality. That the death anxiety is so powerful that these conversations about death are reminders of the fact that everybody will die, and that's not a comfortable thing to sit with.

### Andrew Maxwell

Everybody will die and most likely everyone will deal with loss at some point. These are the facts of life. Yet as a society, we often don't have the emotional tools, language, or even the desire to deal with death and bereavement. We need to think about why and then we need to change.

I'm Andrew Maxwell and I would like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. To the elders past, present, and emerging on whose country this recording is taking place.

This is The Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia or DCA. In our second series, we peer into the lives of fascinating people whose individual stories create the tapestry of diversity that make up Australia and its workplaces. This episode we're dealing with death and bereavement head on. This might be disturbing or upsetting to some who are in the process of grieving so listener caution is advised. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander listeners are also warned that the following episode may contain descriptions of deceased persons. We also discuss death and bereavement in indigenous communities and families in a separate episode.

But now we start with our storyteller, Lisa Gallate. Lisa is the author of a book on bereavement called *Hitting my reset: a memoir on grief and how to make it fit your life.*

### Lisa Gallate

When I was younger and at university, I lost my sister and her partner in a car accident. She was just 21 years old at the time and that was a very shocking experience for myself and my family, because nothing can prepare you for something as sudden and violent as a car accident. Then when I was going through early adulthood and my early employment years, I lost my husband to depression and suicide and following his death I also lost my younger brother to brain cancer. Later on in life I've also had the unfortunate experience of multiple miscarriages, and I'm now facing the ending of my parents' life stages as they go through very significant health issues.

### Andrew Maxwell

Being at university at the time of her sister's death, Lisa found the semester breaks a reprieve from the added stress of here studies, and a time when she could focus on her grief. But later she found workplaces provided a different kind of stress.

### Lisa Gallate

I found it very stressful because I was trying to put on a public face in my workplace that was completely contradictory to how I felt. And I was in a very stressful role, and the two seem to culminate in me dealing with inordinate amounts of stress that I found very difficult to deal with. I found it very difficult to concentrate in my work. I found it very difficult to talk about it to anyone. And unfortunately, even though I think people felt that they were doing the best thing by me, they were very unapproachable, perhaps it was because they didn't really know what to say to me. But they didn't really invite conversation and nobody was really engaging with me to check how I was managing on a personal and emotional level.

### Andrew Maxwell

Lisa's struggle to maintain professional balance while going through personal turmoil is common.

### Lisa Gallate

I think it's because we either have created the expectation as employers, or we have created the expectation as employees, that our corporate world means business. And it means objectivity and it means that we're all supposed to be linear and we're all supposed to avoid showing too much personality. And that includes the harder sides of our personality, which are the emotional sides and sometimes the negative emotional sides when we are distressed.

### Andrew Maxwell

Despite this, Lisa's views on how to manage these workplace issues rest more with the individual experiencing the grief.

### Lisa Gallate

And I think we each have to take a responsibility for how we manage and address and identify those issues within our workplace, and how we look after our colleagues, and also how we look after ourselves. Because it's not just an expectation that other people can support us. We also need to be responsible for our own self-welfare, and we also need to be able to identify when we need to seek support from others.

### Andrew Maxwell

This of course is not to say that colleagues shouldn't provide support for the bereaved and Lisa urges others who want to offer support to just make themselves available.

### Lisa Gallate

It's really about starting conversations. And even if you don't know what to say, it's very easy to ask, "How can I help? What can I do for you? What would you like me to say? How can we better support you?" I think everyone has different perspectives on grief and I think we need to really respect that we all come from different emotional places and attitudes and different cultures as well and so it's really important terms to respect that we all have different ideas about grief and how it should be expressed and how we should discuss it.

### Andrew Maxwell

Finally, Lisa advises not shying away from the realities of death and bereavement.

### Lisa Gallate

But ultimately, I think that the expression of Leave to Grieve, for example, which is a petition to try and increase statutory entitlements to be able to take additional leave when you are suffering a bereavement, is really expressing what it actually is. And it is leave to be able to grieve the loss of a loved one, and I don't think we need to couch it in euphemisms or other language. I think it's really probably more helpful if we can be more direct about it and at the same time respectful of the views and attitudes and different cultures of our workplace.

### Andrew Maxwell

Experts agree with Lisa's take on the diversity of grieving styles. One such expert is Christopher Hall, a psychologist and the CEO of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement.

### Christopher Hall

I think we need to recognise that like any human activity, we all have different styles and preferences in the way we engage with the world and the way we grieve. Some people are very public about their experience of loss. They'll actively seek out support of family, friends and colleagues, and others are much more private. In fact, might see the workplace as a place of respite from the experience of grief and we know increasingly that distraction and avoidance from grief is really important.

So I think rather than providing prescriptions in terms of how we might provide support to someone, I really like to suggest that we really need to cultivate curiosity about their experience. And ask them what they have found helpful, what they're found unhelpful. Whether they would like staff to acknowledge directly their experience of loss or the illness of a family member, or if they'd like a more private way of that being responded to.

### Andrew Maxwell

Chris says showing up for the other person is key. If you're in a management position, you need to take the initiative to reach out and connect in a timely manner. The old adage of, "Let me know if I can do anything," doesn't really cut it.

### Christopher Hall

For many bereaved people, what has been of powerful value for them has been to answer the door shortly after an event has happened and to find a manager standing at the other side of their door who is present, who is available and who expresses human compassion about what has taken place. So I think it's important that we often take ourselves, and that might be attending the funeral, going to the home. But being very clear about communicating on behalf of the organisation as well as on behalf of them, their care, their value of a member of staff. Because again, individuals will certainly note the presence of a manager or a representative of the organisation.

### Andrew Maxwell

Beyond bereavement and in the case of a colleague dying, emotional leadership is even more critical.

### Christopher Hall

So one of the things that we would look at doing is, is there a way of visibly acknowledging that this event took place. So some workplaces may light a candle, they may place a candle at the person's desk, they may place it at reception. They will provide an opportunity for staff to come together. They'll provide opportunities for staff to attend a funeral. I think it's also important to acknowledge that grief and trauma are often kind of live together, and to acknowledge that particularly if a death took place at the workplace, that the workplace itself can be a kind of a trigger, a reminder of the event that took place. It's important for managers to be aware of balancing the needs of the workplace along with the kinds of demand and capability of staff for a period of time. To provide good quality information that normalises people's responses to this event, and also to take a longer term view.

### Andrew Maxwell

Chris also has some thoughts on acknowledging how different cultures grief.

### Christopher Hall

I think it's difficult for people to get their head around the dominant white Anglo culture in terms of understandings of grief and bereavement. The ideas that emotions are private affairs, that we're uncomfortable with strong expressions of emotional distress. The idea that we should kind of check at least our hearts at the door at the workplace, and return to be productive, tax-paying members of society. So I think when we extend that to, for example, either the Muslim faith or the Jewish traditions or a questions of Sorry Business, then I think where workplaces are generally poorly equipped to understand the very idiosyncratic nature of grief and bereavement. We need to take a position that this bereaved person is the expert in their experience. Effectively we're saying, "Teach me what this experience is like for you. How can I most effectively support you? What can I do to lighten this burden as much as I can and your colleagues can?"

### Andrew Maxwell

Chris is strong in his views about bereavement leave that is currently available to Australian workers.

### Christopher Hall

Frankly, I think is, it's absurd and there are other countries, and the UK in particular, that have moved beyond that and I think are much more responsive to the reality. We know that social support tends to diminish three days after a death. So this view, again a cultural view, that by the time we have defrosted the last casserole, threw out the last bunch of flowers, that were kind of life's back to normal and we know that that's not the case. For many people their grieving starts when people have disappeared or gone away. I think the idea of having even timeframes around grief, it's certainly very neat and very tidy, but it really doesn't reflect the personal experience. I think if you spoke to any parent whose child had died, they would say that three days is clearly inadequate in terms of their experience.

### Andrew Maxwell

Ultimately, Chris says dealing with death and bereavement comes down to one thing.

### Christopher Hall

Well, I think in many ways it goes to the question of what kind of workplace do you want to create? Do you want to create a workplace where people feel valued, where leadership actively reaches out and provides support, or a workplace where the burden is placed on the bereaved person to effectively manage their experience themselves.

### Andrew Maxwell

As for Lisa, she managed to integrate grief into her life. This process was aided with the right support. A psychologist from her adopted city of Sydney.

### Lisa Gallate

And he was fabulous in helping me manage my stress and manage my grief so that I could function and be productive in my workplace on a daily basis. And then try to park my grief so that I could manage what I needed to do on a daily basis, both for my work and for myself, and then to deal with it outside of business hours. And it's a very difficult thing to try and have that discipline when you are so overwhelmed by grief. But it's a very important part I think of the healing process, is being able to find a way to fit the grief into your life.

### Andrew Maxwell

And the results have been encouraging.

### Lisa Gallate

I have tried very hard to build my own life, notwithstanding my grief experiences. And to have a positive life and enjoy life, and to be as productive as I can every day and make the most out of every day and to try and fill it with as many activities, love, experiences, adventures as possible. Partly in memory and honour of the ones that I've lost because they're not here to do the same thing. And of course, partly for myself because I realise firsthand how short life is, but also to be able to give back to people that have really supported me. If I can be positive, encouraging and supportive, to be the best friend, daughter, mother, wife, et cetera, that I can be, I think that's a really important agenda.

But the other thing is, is that I accept that I will have my grief for the rest of my life. And I don't believe in the literature that says that you should be able to heal yourself from it, because I don't think I will ever be fully healed from my grief. I've lost loved ones who were a very important part of my life and they always will be. So although I won't be ever healed by it, I carry it with me and I have learned how to try and manage it so that I can still lead a fully productive life, but it's very much with me and I accept, that it is with me.

### Andrew Maxwell

The Art of Inclusion is a podcast from Diversity Council Australia. Andrea Maltman Rivera and Sam Loy are the producers, and Lisa Annese is executive producer. You can keep the conversation going by reaching out on our Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter pages. If you like what you heard, check out the first season of The Art of Inclusion either from the DCA website, dca.org.au or from your favourite podcast player. On our website you can access DCA related research and training, including our Future-Flex report on mainstreaming flexibility, the Inclusion@Work Index, and our inclusive leadership resource. You can also access Beyondblue and SANE Australia's resources on suicide prevention at their respective websites.

This episode is dedicated to Paul Annese and little Luca. I'm Andrew Maxwell, thanks for listening.