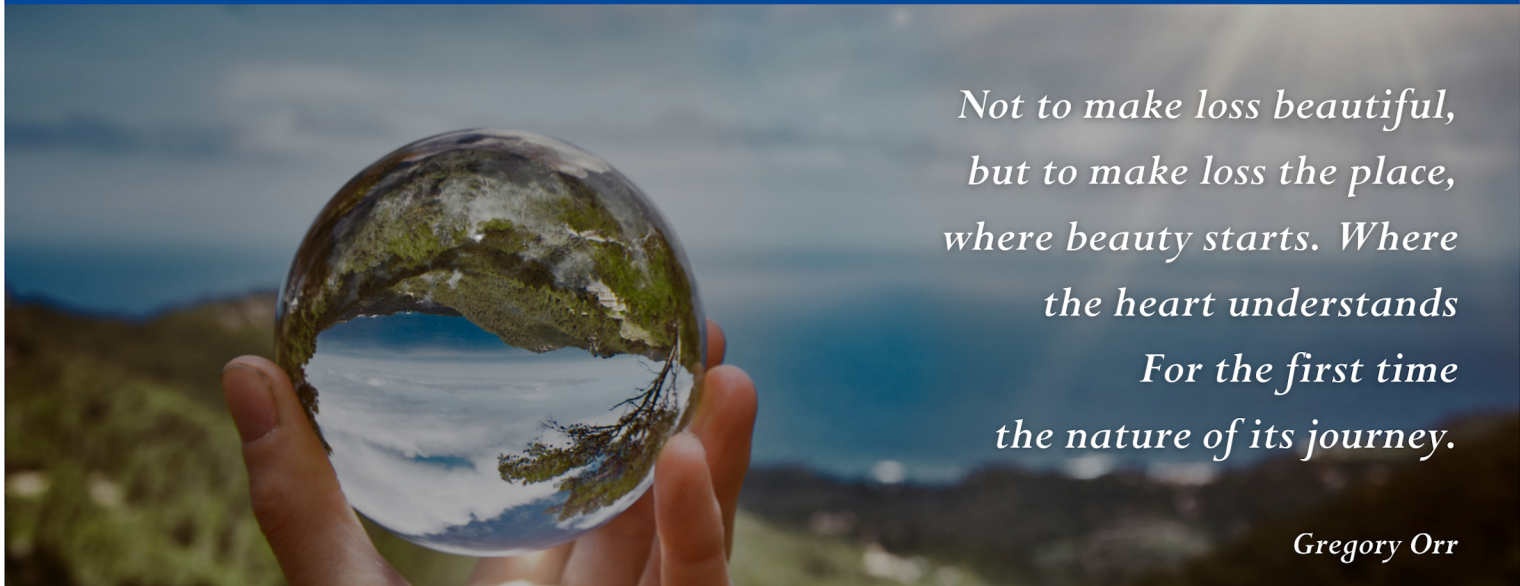


FIRSTLIGHT NEWSLETTER



*Not to make loss beautiful,
but to make loss the place,
where beauty starts. Where
the heart understands
For the first time
the nature of its journey.*

Gregory Orr

MESSAGE FROM FIRSTLIGHT CEO

Dear friends and supporters of FirstLight,

I feel very privileged to have been FirstLight's inaugural CEO and to have had the opportunity to work with meaning and purpose for and with many wonderful people. As I take my leave to support family across the water, I look back with some pride on the expansion of service provision over the last 6 years for the benefit of some 758 families who have suffered the devastating loss of their child. During this time, through the amazing work of the clinical team and national network of therapists, FirstLight provided crisis intervention services and delivered more than 6,000 free counselling sessions to families. Our mission has been to bring some light into the darkness that enveloped the families who reached out to FirstLight for support. I sincerely thank them for placing their trust in us and hope that FirstLight's professional and related services have made a positive difference and helped them on their grief journey, towards accommodating their loss and moving on with their lives.

FirstLight has reached a significant scale in terms of the number of families receiving its services, staff (both in-house and therapists on FirstLight's Register) and funding requirement. I believe we are well positioned to maintain the current level of service and to expand should the requirement be necessary; a likely scenario given the inadequacy of State community-based supports for unexpectedly bereaved families, particularly professional, clinical support services. Importantly, in order to maintain service expansion, a focus on funding must continue and the State has, I believe, the major responsibility in this regard. While increased State funding is very important, and I would include it in my wish list for the betterment of bereavement support services for all concerned, other changes also need to occur, such as:

- A clearer recognition by State agencies that when the trauma of an unexpected child death is experienced by a family, the parents/guardians of surviving children need support so that they can be able to help their children. Too often, the focus is on supporting the child in isolation and funding is restricted to such limited supports.
- A resourced national bereavement policy and a joined-up Government agency approach to bereavement support services provision;
- Availability of timely and comprehensive data on paediatric mortality to inform policy development and intervention services for the betterment of all stakeholders. This can be helped by early publication of the Health Information Bill 2023 and the reforms necessary, including the introduction of a unique health identifier, to improve health policy making, planning processes and intervention services;

Recognition that early intervention is best, and that greater investment is made by the State in prevention services such as professional bereavement counselling;

IN THIS ISSUE:

**FAREWELL
MESSAGE
FROM
FIRSTLIGHT
CEO**

**HOW TO
MANAGE
SECONDARY
TRAUMATIC
STRESS**

**JOURNAL
PROMPTS AND
POETRY**

**HOW TO
GRIEVE THE
BROTHER I
NEVER KNEW**

**HOW TO
SUPPORT A
GRIEVING
TEEN AS A
FRIEND**

FirstLight
Supporting Suddenly Bereaved Parents & Families



- Recognition that early intervention is best, and that greater investment is made by the State in prevention services such as professional bereavement counselling;
- Substantial additional progress on State provision of multiannual funding of charities. Every year FirstLight spends a disproportionate amount of scarce management time on multiple one-off grant applications to the nine HSE Community Health Organisations for relatively small grants under the HSE National Lottery scheme, and each grant received must be accounted for and reported on separately. This is hugely inefficient for FirstLight, and it must also be so for the HSE;
- FirstLight endeavours to operate in accordance with the highest governance standards. This comes at a cost in the sense that it requires a great deal of management time. Funding for compliance costs would ease this necessary and appropriate overhead;
- While I believe that a greater proportion of the funds required to run FirstLight should come from the State, the opportunity for philanthropic giving could be incentivised more.

I have worked and collaborated with so many wonderful people in my time in FirstLight and have learnt a great deal from them, too.

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Council members I have worked with and the support they have given me throughout. I single out Oliver Blackwell, a Council member since 2013 and Chairperson since 2019, who has contributed so much to FirstLight. As the wise saying goes, behind every good man, there is a great woman. Oliver's wife Maeve has also given huge support to FirstLight and to me, and I would like to acknowledge that and thank her, also.

To Team FirstLight, thank you for your support and for being such wonderful colleagues. You have risen to every challenge and met every request with willingness, energy and resolve.

Thank you to FirstLight's dedicated, professional therapists around the country who are a big part of FirstLight, providing every day valued counselling services to FirstLight families.

FirstLight has been fortunate in having the support of Sabina Higgins (as its Patron) and Una Crawford O'Brien and Gerard Heneghan (as its Ambassadors). I will remember with fondness Sabina's hospitality in the Árus, our Mile in Memory walk with Una in St. Annes Park and my trek to Glenamaddy to meet Gerard's family and other supporters of FirstLight.

In FirstLight we regard all families who have reached out for support as *FirstLight families*. I confidently encourage you to continue to call on my colleagues in FirstLight in the future should you need further support or a listening ear.

FirstLight is in a good place to meet the future (another 47 years at least!), and to grow as necessary in size and reach and I wish Jennifer Mc Carthy Flynn every success and happiness as the next Chief Executive.

With my warmest regards,

Fionnuala Sheehan, CEO, FirstLight

Secondary Traumatic Stress: What it is, how to identify it, and how to manage it

This piece was originally written and directed toward professionals working with clients dealing with trauma. However, people close to bereaved individuals may also find this information and advice equally as helpful.



What is Secondary Traumatic Stress?

According to the Office for Victims of Crime (OVC), “Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) refers to the natural consequent behaviours and emotions that often result from knowing about a traumatising event experienced by another, and the stress resulting from helping, or wanting to help, a traumatised or suffering person.”

For mental health professionals, the risk of STS can be an occupational hazard because counsellors can begin to feel feelings that are similar to what their clients experience as they work together. Nearly half of practicing counsellors reported experiencing symptoms of STS in a study published in 2019 by The Professional Counselor. “When we are truly in that authentic place of interacting with someone and engaging them through their trauma, we will most certainly experience some sort of ramification from that in one way or another,” says Dr. Nate Perron, Clinical Assistant Professor at Northwestern University.

STS is related to compassion fatigue. However, individuals can have STS without compassion fatigue, which is viewed as a combination of STS and burnout, or emotional exhaustion. People of all ages and levels of work experience can be affected by STS, and secondary trauma can work in conjunction with stress from their own problems to overwhelm the helping professional. “In fact, the final trigger for some people who might seem to be functioning extremely well can be very unique to the individual,” he said. “It might be based on what current life stressors they’re going through themselves at a particular moment, or maybe a loss that they just had, or grief that they’re experiencing within their own life.”

What Are The Ways To Identify Secondary Traumatic Stress?

Anyone can have a bad day or an “off” day, but knowing when an individual is developing secondary traumatic stress is vital for maintaining personal health and well-being. Not everyone is affected in the same way or exhibits the same warning signs.

“It would be really individualised for different people,” Dr. Perron explains. “However, as we look at what signs are used, for instance, in the diagnosis for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), those same types of stress symptoms could be evident with secondary traumatic stress.”

Signs of Secondary Traumatic Stress:

- **Hypervigilance.** Worrying intensely or having recurring thoughts.
- **Nightmares.** Waking from dreams with intense dread and fear.
- **Change in sleep habits.** Sleeping too much or too little.
- **Change in appetite.** Eating too much or too little.
- **New anxieties or fears.** Suddenly being afraid of the familiar.
- **Increasing agitation.** More easily losing patience and snapping at others.
- **Loss of pleasure.** Lacking interest in once-favourite activities or hobbies.
- **Somatic condition.** Having a physical response (pain, weakness) to distress.
- **Inability to do work.** Struggling to perform tasks and handle responsibilities.

By addressing the signs of STS, individuals and professionals can prevent jeopardising their professional performance. The American Counseling Association (ACA) reports that negative outcomes associated with vicarious trauma can include low motivation, increased errors, decreased quality, avoidance of responsibilities, perfectionism, and lack of flexibility.

How to Manage Secondary Traumatic Stress

There is serious risk in overlooking STS, so individuals and professionals need to stay vigilant about proactively looking for dangerous signs. "I think probably one of the most important factors is a level of self-awareness—that self-reflective process to be able to look internally and recognise, 'OK, here are my own trigger signs. Here are the warning signs that I'm getting to a bad place,'" Dr. Perron says. To engage in that self-reflective process, he recommends that counsellors seek their own counselling, lean on colleagues or other professionals in the space, or connect on a deeper level with loved ones to work through problems.

And just as warning signs can vary by the individual, effective coping techniques can vary. Here is a list of tips and suggestions for self-care strategies that professionals can use to find balance, be aware of one's needs, and make connections offered by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

Tips for Preventing and Managing Secondary Traumatic Stress:

- Practice brief relaxation techniques during the workday
-
- Increase experiences that have spiritual or philosophical meaning to you
-
- Keep a journal to get worries off your mind
-
- Access support from colleagues routinely by sharing concerns, identifying difficult experiences, and strategies to solve problems
-
- Increase leisure activities, stress management, and exercise
-
- Stay aware of limitations and needs
-
- Recognize when one is Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired (HALT) and take the appropriate measures to remedy
-
- Maintain boundaries: delegate, say no, and avoid getting overloaded with work
-
- Pay extra attention to rekindling close interpersonal relationships; spend time with family and friends
-
- Practice good sleep routines
-
- Eat healthy foods
-
- Make time for self-reflection
-
- Find things that you enjoy or that make you laugh
-
- Write, draw, paint – express yourself
-
- Limit caffeine and substance use
-
- Participate in formal help if extreme stress persists for greater than 2-3 weeks

Self-care has three basic aspects: awareness, balance, and connection. First, determine what you are feeling, your stress level, your thoughts, etc. Next, seek balance in all areas of your life, including work, personal and family life, rest, leisure, and activity. Finally, build activities into your life that create connections and supportive relationships with others, including co-workers, friends, family, and the community broadly.

This article was compiled by our intern, Molly Gleydura, from the following resources: Northwestern Family Institute blog article 'Self-care Strategies for Managing Secondary Traumatic Stress, and The National Child Traumatic Stress Network.

Journal Prompts for Grief

In the previous article, we learnt that engaging in practices that build self-awareness can reduce stress and the effects of trauma. Keeping a grief journal is one practice that individuals can find helpful when trying to cope with a bereavement.

What is a Grief Journal?

A grief journal can be whatever you want it to be. It can be a private space for you to explore your thoughts and feelings, where you are in control of what you write, which can be really healing when life feels out of control. It can also be a place to keep memories of your loved one, and for you to reflect on your journey through grief over time.

The process of journaling helps us to slow down and be more reflective. As you transform your internal world of feelings into words, images or drawings on a page, you might find that your grief starts to feel more manageable.

Keeping a Grief Journal Can Help People:

- become more aware of their emotions
- make sense of their thoughts as they write them down
- feel uncensored, unjudged and free to express whatever is on their mind
- keep their memories safe
- feel less stressed
- find sleep more restful
- reflect on their grief journey and notice how it is changing over time

Sometimes starting a grief journal can be daunting. You may be staring at a blank page, not quite sure how to begin. Here are some prompts which might help you to get started:

Today, I am really missing...

Today my body feels...

The hardest moment today was...

I have been feeling...

Something that helped me cope today was...

My favourite memory of you is...

I wish the people around me knew...

Today, I'm going to practice self-care and try to...

I could use more of...

I could use less of...

I am grateful for...

This piece was adapted from a Sue Ryder blog article.



Not To Make Loss Beautiful... by Gregory Orr

This piece was written by poet Gregory Orr. Orr's poetry is widely regarded and has been included in many anthologies. At the age of 12, he accidentally killed his brother in a hunting accident, an event his family was never able to talk about. His mother died soon thereafter, and Orr found in poetry the transformative power of language. In an interview with National Public Radio, Orr once stated, "I believe in poetry as a way of surviving the emotional chaos, spiritual confusions, and traumatic events that come with being alive."

*Not to make loss beautiful,
but to make loss the place,
where beauty starts. Where
the heart understands
For the first time
the nature of its journey.*

*Love, yes. The body
of the beloved as the gift
bestowed. But only
temporarily. Given freely,
but now to be earned.*

*Given without thought,
and now loss
has made us thoughtful.*





How it Feels to Grieve the Brother I Never Knew

This piece is taken from the personal stories section of the [Child Bereavement UK website](#). The author, Andrew, speaks about his experience of being the child born after a child that has died.

Losing a child or sibling is heart-breaking and world-changing. But how does it feel when you did not experience the heart-break first-hand? When the changed world is the only world you know?

There are many conflicting emotions. You feel sad but you are scared to voice this with your family in case it will make them sad too. Day-to-day, you sometimes forget you had another sibling, filling you with guilt when you realise you had forgotten. Jealous that your family got to meet and know your brother and you didn't, no matter how short a time it was. You have feelings of uncertainty in yourself and your place in your family – if my sibling had lived, would I have been born?

Part of you feels a sense of “inheriting grief”, almost being a bystander of your family's loss. You see the sadness of your family on those special days, hear the stories from your parents and older siblings and see how it affects them. You want to support them and console them but are worried about sharing your own feelings in case they may not be seen as valid. Which they are. You mourn the person you never got to meet and the experiences you never got to share.

As a child, I used to think about the games we never got to play, the birthdays we did not get to celebrate, the toys we could have shared, the embarrassing primary school photos with the bad haircuts, growing up together. As a teenager, I wondered if my big brother would have been my confidante, my secret-keeper, my argument sparring-partner, my saviour after drunken teenage parties, my partner in crime. As an adult, I imagine if they would have approved of my partner, helped me move into my first home, been the best man at my wedding?

These are the same thoughts that my older siblings have thought about the brother they lost, my parents about the son they lost. No matter at what chapter you enter your family story, losing a sibling changes how that story continues and impacts all its characters in different ways.

When my family speak of my brother, they speak about him as a baby. The version of him that they knew and loved. For me, he is always a bigger brother. I imagine him as tall like myself, sporty like my older brothers, funny and intelligent like my parents. In Portuguese, there is a way to describe this indescribable feeling: *saudade*. *Saudade* (sau-da-gee) is a feeling of missing, longing, nostalgia, loss for something or someone that you may have never known or experienced. It is a feeling for a time or something that could have been and never was. It doesn't diminish the strength of that feeling or the sadness and grief associated with it. It is just different.

Losing a brother I never knew is still a loss in my life. I love him, I miss him and I mourn the life we could have shared together.

11 Ways to Support a Grieving Friend As a Teen

Creator of *Teenage Grief Sucks*, Natalie Adams, shares her tips for supporting friends through their grief.

After my dad's death, my friends were all out enjoying themselves and living their own lives. I felt alone. While you are most likely unable to stop your whole life to be there for your grieving friend, there are many ways that you can make them feel less alone and support them.

1. Acknowledge that You Don't Completely Understand

Pretending that you know exactly what your friend is going through will do more harm than help. Instead, acknowledge that you don't completely understand exactly what they're going through. Say that you're willing to support and try to understand, but realise that you will never know exactly how they feel.

2. Listen and be Sympathetic

Often the best way to support and comfort a person going through grief is by listening to them talk about their feelings and their loved one. It's okay if you don't have all of the answers to your friend's questions. That's not what they need. When I ranted to my friends about my grief, my goal wasn't to hear the best responses in return. I just needed to sort through my thoughts and let someone else know how I was feeling.

3. Don't Minimise Your Friend's Pain

Your friend is most likely going through terrible pain. That is okay and perfectly normal. Let your friend know that you are aware they are hurting and that it's okay to be in pain.

4. Don't Make Everything About You

It's important to remember that their grief is about them, not you.

5. Ask Your Friend What They Need

After my dad's death, I sort of expected my friends to know exactly what to do. They had no clue what to do, though. Questions such as, "How can I be here for you today?" and "What can I do?" are simple ways to let your friend know that you are there for them, and allow you to do what they need.

6. Don't Avoid Talking About Your Friend's Loved One

While you shouldn't pressure your friend to talk about their grief and loved one, let them know that you are open to talking about it. Occasionally ask them "Do you want to talk about your loved one?" or "Whenever you want to talk, I am here."

7. Keep Checking In!

The week my dad died, everyone was all over me. I was supported by my teachers, friends, and even friends' parents. The next week, however, it seemed like almost everyone had forgotten about my loss and moved on. While you don't have to ask your friend 24/7 about how they're doing, they will appreciate it greatly if you occasionally check in with them about their grief. The first few weeks after the death of your friend's loved one are just the beginning of their grief, and they'll need your support for a much longer time.

8. Give Space, But Not Too Much

Some people need space during grief, while others don't. Whenever you have social plans or go to events that your friend would have otherwise gone to with you, still invite them. Most likely they will not want to go, but knowing that you are still trying to include them is positive and will help your grieving friend know that they are not alone.

9. Make Fun "Grief Plans"

Grief plans can be many things, such as going to see movies, going on walks, and visiting coffee shops that you haven't been to in a while. Grief plans are meant to be semi-interesting activities that will allow you to spend time with your friend. The goal of grief plans is to show your friend that, while things may be terrible right now, happiness still exists. If grief comes up, definitely stop and talk about feelings and how your friend is doing, though.

10. Be Supportive, but Not TOO Supportive

Some people undergo major lifestyle changes as a result of grief. But, if your friend is making changes to their lives that are negative, however, you should not support them. Realise that they are going through a hard time, but also gently try to get them to choose healthier things.

11. Don't Expect Your Friend's Grief to "Get Better"

Grief is something that most people have to cope with for the rest of their life. Just because the grief eases up a bit, though, does not mean that it is completely gone.

Friends of FirstLight

The need for FirstLight's services has never been greater. The number of families referred for support or who self-refer has grown year on year since 2019.

FirstLight does not charge for its services. Families who lose a child are immediately faced with unexpected financial outlay, and timely provision of professional support is most beneficial. However, funding the organisation's services as demand continues to grow is challenging.

If you would like to support the work that we do, you can do so by becoming a *Friend of FirstLight*. Your donation can be a once-off, or you may choose to offer it on a monthly or annual basis. 100% of donations go towards crisis intervention and professional counselling services for families who have experienced the death of their child. For more information and to donate, please visit: www.firstlight.ie/friends-of-firstlight



Baby Loss Awareness Week is Coming Up... What is It?



Now in its 21st year, Baby Loss Awareness Week began as an October remembrance day initiated by parents in the UK. The following year, the events expanded to include the very first 'Wave of Light' service in which families light candles at the same time to honour the babies they had lost. Throughout the years, the campaign continued to grow and form into what we now know as Baby Loss Awareness week which is a series of events, virtual and in-person, held annually from 9 – 15 October. The aims of Baby Loss Awareness Week include raising awareness of pregnancy and baby loss, providing support to anyone affected by pregnancy loss and the death of a baby, working with health professionals and services to improve bereavement care, and reducing preventable deaths.

Baby Loss Awareness Week, 9th to 15th October 2023

- An annual collaboration between more than 60 charities across the UK and Ireland, Baby Loss Awareness Week aims to raise awareness about the key issues affecting those who have experienced a sudden loss of a child. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Global Wave of Light, Sunday, October 15th 2023, 7:00 pm

- Please join FirstLight for the Global Wave of Light Sunday, October 15th at 7 pm. Baby Loss Awareness Week finishes each year on October 15th with the Global Wave of Light'. October 15th is also International Pregnancy and Infant Loss Remembrance Day and is recognised across the world. We would like to invite you to join with other families across the world and take part in the Global Wave of Light'. For further details: www.babyloss-awareness.org

Irish Life Dublin Marathon, Sunday, October 29th 2023

- The Irish Life Dublin Marathon is the fourth-largest marathon in Europe. More than 20,000 runners from over 60 countries will take to the Dublin city centre course on October 29th 2023. The race takes in many of Dublin's historic landmarks and finishes in the heart of the city. For further details visit: www.irishlifedublinmarathon.ie
- Did you know that FirstLight is able to assist you in your fundraising? For example, we can provide you with t-shirts and wristbands! Reach out to Andrew Mernagh at andrew@firstlight.ie for fundraising assistance.

Bereaved Children's Awareness Week, 13th - 17th November 2023

- Bereaved Children's Awareness Week takes place each year in November to highlight bereaved children's needs and to provide a voice for them to be heard. For further details: www.childhoodbereavement.ie

Submit Referrals @ www.firstlight.ie

Carmichael Centre, 4 North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7

Phone: 01-8732711: Website: www.firstlight.ie: Charity No. CHY7716

If you have a newsletter query or a story for inclusion in the newsletter please email info@firstlight.ie