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SURVIVING LOCKDOWN

Interview with Sue

Sue: *“With all the mental health issues that are coming up for people at this time and that sort of low level depression that everyone I think is experiencing, there's such a sense of helplessness and frustration. We tried this last time, it doesn't seem to have worked. Is this going to work this time?”*

Celia: I'm Celia Fielke and this is Messages of Hope. Today we're talking with Sue, who shares where do we find hope when there is so much uncertainty and separation from our loved ones?

The second wave of Coronavirus in Victoria has shaken us out of complacency about the effects of the virus. The lockdown is affecting mental health and for those with loved ones in hospital and aged care there's a deep level of grief. Our guest today, Sue, manages the spiritual care team for a hospital in Melbourne. She sees the impacts which many of us don't. Where do we find hope when there is so much uncertainty and separation from our loved ones?

So Sue, tell me, how is it this time around with this sort of second wave? What are you noticing?

Sue: I think the first time around there was a lot of inspirational stuff about, you know, let's all learn how to bake bread and let's make the most of this and learn what's really important in life. It feels like the second time round, generally, people are just more in survival mode. So they're really feeling very isolated. There's such a sense of helplessness and frustration.

Celia: Yeah, there's that sense of, Is it ever gonna get better?

Sue: Yeah. I think we've become very good at watching the numbers. We see the numbers go up, we see them go down, we see more deaths and I think that creates a level of doom and gloom for people, going “well, we have to resign ourselves to this is the way of life now.”

Celia: How are you noticing it in your workspace?

Sue: Yeah. Well, we have to keep our distance from each other. We're wearing masks all the time. So in a hospital, you wear masks anyway, but communicating with masks with each other, and then with face shields now with patients, so all patients can see are your eyes.

Celia: How does that work, is it weird or just like different?

Sue: Yeah, it's weird because you have to try and communicate everything with your eyes or your eyebrows and you know, trying to be empathic with your eyes feels a bit stupid in some ways, but that's the only way we can make connection at the moment. Whereas before we might've held someone's hand as they were dying, we can't do anything like that at the moment.

Celia: So what can you do?

Sue: A lot of stuff's happening via video call or on the telephone. I guess the work that I've been doing with patients and their families, there aren't any visitors allowed at the moment so patients aren't allowed to have family with them. So just dealing with their grief around, you know, not being able to be there at pivotal times.

Celia: So you're right in this. This end of life grief, happening with this. You're saying people can't necessarily have their loved ones with them at that time?

Sue: They don't have them at all. There might be some exceptions made on compassionate grounds, but if you're a COVID positive patient, it's impossible to have anyone with you. So there's a lot of disenfranchised grief and a lot of trauma as well for people. So I think the mental health implications are huge and that's going to be a big factor going forward.

Celia: Sue, how do you bring hope or comfort to both the person without their family there, and also the people who can't get to their family member who's suffering.

Sue: I think the hope and comfort come from providing the space for them to talk about how it affects them. If they're angry, letting them be angry, not diminishing any of the experiences they have and not being frightened by any of the emotions. The other thing that I know a lot of the nursing staff are doing is if a patient is in the COVID wards and they're actively dying, they will have someone stay with them. And so I can actually reassure families when I ring them that someone was actually with your loved one and stayed with them. They weren't alone. So even just little things like that help families.

But it's also about, you know, we're having to discover new rituals. How do we create new rituals that help people grieve at the time of death when they are separated? So we're talking to family members about, okay, so, you know, your father is actively dying and he might only have a few hours left. What space can you create for yourselves in your home that actually honours him? It might be having some of his music playing. It might be lighting candles, but it's actually-reinforcing the importance of ritual. I think it's also about helping people to plan what they might do once lockdown's over. So giving them other ways in which they might process their grief and say, okay, this is a terrible situation at the moment and there will be opportunities for you to do other things. So maybe what you're missing now, I mean you can't replace being with someone when they die, but other ways of honoring relationship and the person, having to be creative around that. And that's always a very bespoke individual, discussion and ritual that people create themselves in relation to the people they love.

Celia: With all the uncertainty around how long we'll be dealing with coronavirus restrictions it's not surprising that anxiety is on the rise. What helps people who are anxious about what the future holds? They're not facing people who are sick, but they are anxious about where's all this going to end up? What kind of things can they do for self care to help them?

Sue: That's a really hard question. I think a really important part of it is actually normalizing what you're experiencing. So, knowing that being anxious about this is a very normal reaction and it's widespread. And so there's nothing wrong with you if you feel anxious. Then it's about how does that anxiety affect your life? So if you find that it's actually becoming overwhelming and stopping you from being able to participate in anything in life that brings you any joy, it's about seeking some help, someone to talk to. It's accessing professional help, but at the same time, it's also becoming aware of what nurtures you, what helps calm your anxiety and not feeling that it's, overindulgent just to take time to breathe. Breathing's really important, but anxiety is quite frightening for lots of people. And I think, communicating with other people and sharing your story can really help as well. So staying in contact, which might be counterintuitive when you're feeling anxious. I think as a country, as a world, we're going to have to find new ways to deal with what will be a global level of anxiety now.

Celia: Yeah. It's that feeling of just uncertainty? I don't think we've ever been in a situation where the future is so uncertain. Particularly if you're used to planning and being in control and all of that.

Sue: It is, it's very difficult. And then depending on your personality type, too. Yeah, if you like to be in control, you'd be absolutely going nuts at the moment. I think it's just about accepting that, you know, it's not like we have to fix ourselves. This is the way we've been created. We all have different things that make us anxious. I think there's a lot of healing and acceptance of that and just saying, okay, this will affect me for a while and maybe I need to find the help or the person that will help me deal with strategies for working through it. Not to consider that there's something wrong with you. We put these incredible burdens on ourselves by saying, well, there must be something very wrong with me because I feel anxious. Accept that actually this is how it's going to be for awhile.

It's something that we all need to watch out for. And I think it can, and, you know, as someone who has clinical depression myself, there can be some very scary times with that. And I think it's also knowing for people to have supportive people they can contact if they feel scared about what's happening for them. It's actually about, take the next step and just keep surviving.

Celia: For many people, the question of "is there a God" often comes to mind in times of uncertainty and lack of control. Sue, as someone who sees the deadly results of Covid as a hospital worker and also has a faith in God, how does your faith travel through times like this?

Sue: Well, so it travels a bit of a roller coaster. I think, for me, it always comes down to this question of what does God allow? Why doesn't God stop things? It's the perennial questions that I think a lot of people ask and alongside that is a very strong sense of, yeah but God's actually here.

Celia: What gives you that sense?

Sue: Well for me, it's music, I think a lot of my spirituality happens via music. Whether I'm playing it myself or whether I'm listening to it. My spirituality, my faith, is also very much based on the image of the crucified Christ. So Christ on the cross with us, with us in suffering. We all have different images of God and ones that resonate with us, I guess the victorious Christ, the victorious God standing up and being the Lord of power and glory, doesn't sit well with me in these times. It's the scarred and vulnerable Christ I think that I can imagine coming alongside. Yeah. And I guess I feel that's really what God does with us, come alongside and be in the dark places with people.

Celia: So why that particularly resonate with you at the moment?

Sue: Because there's such a sense of helplessness and frustration. And I guess in some ways, when you don't know what the outcome's going to be of a pandemic, it's a time of grief and it's a time of darkness. It's also a time of trying to find hope where we can, and not knowing what that looks like. I think if I know that God's in that with me, then, he's got it. They'll always be hope. But I just don't know what'll it look like on the other side.

Celia: Mmm, we really have to have that hope don't we, because we don't know what it's going to be. It's just that I guess, faith, isn't it, stepping out in faith?

Sue: It is. And I think with all the mental health issues that are coming up for people at this time and that sort of low level depression that everyone I think is experiencing. It's really hard to see hope.

Celia: So, how do you pass that hope onto people

Sue: I think for me, it's about noticing and listening to people and meeting them where they're at. That's very much what it feels to me like Jesus does. So if my staff are down, if they're feeling really flat, it's actually taking the time to sit with them and saying, so how are things going? And so trying to convey that each person that I meet is actually important and special because they are one of God's children. And I want them to see something, even just the smallest little hint of Christ coming through me. And that to me is how I work with it. Grasping what you can and for me, it's grasping onto the hope that the person of Jesus, who's actually, experienced pain and suffering, he's actually there and he understands. That's my hope at this moment, knowing that Jesus is actually right there next to me, and he's taking it with me.

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