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**LOCAL GRIEF SUPPORT CENTER ADDRESSES HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS’
GRIEF AT A CRITICAL TIME**

Michael’s Place Adds Professional Grief Program to Support Services

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By nature, work in the healthcare field requires a primary focus on the needs and wellbeing of patients, and often, healthcare professionals’ own emotions are left suppressed and unaddressed. In a [recent study*](#) published by the journal of Occupational Medicine, nearly half of healthcare professionals working in Intensive Care Units during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic reported symptoms “consistent with a probable diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression or anxiety or problem drinking” and nearly 1 in 7 reported “thoughts of self-harm.”

In a culture that discourages vulnerability, how can employers and healthcare providers effectively address the emotional needs of medical professionals while still maintaining a high-level patient care? Northern Michigan’s grief support center, Michael’s Place, located in Traverse City, answers this concern with the addition of its Professional Grief Program led by Program Director, Melissa Fournier, LMSW. “Being raised by a mother who was an ICU nurse and having spent a significant time in my career as a hospice social worker and bereavement counselor, I became acutely aware of grief’s toll on those working in high loss environments,” explained Fournier.

Bill Smith, M.D., retired local physician and board member at Michael’s Place, joined Fournier in expressing concern about the lack of support in place for healthcare workers. “Long before our current pandemic, there had often been an unspoken burden placed on healthcare workers faced with daily grief associated with their jobs and very few resources in place to help process this as they move on to the next patient in the next room,” Dr. Smith explained.

In 2019, Fournier enlisted the help of Dr. Smith, along with other community professionals including local physicians, clinicians, and educators, establishing the Professional Grief Program at Michael’s Place. Simultaneously, Fournier initiated an international call for submissions from healthcare workers on stories and poems of their experiences of professional grief. Using these submissions, she co-edited *The Healer’s Burden: Stories and Poems of Professional*

Grief, (www.healersburden.com) published in 2020 by The University of Iowa Carver College of Medicine.

“When founding the Professional Grief Program and working on *The Healer’s Burden*, I never would have imagined that the launch of both a professional grief program and book would coincide with a devastating pandemic.” Fournier emphasized. “It has become apparent that focused attention on the emotional needs of healthcare professionals on the frontlines, the daily despair they encounter, and the grief they experience has never been more necessary. “

The Professional Grief Program at Michael’s Place offers peer support tailored to meet the needs of the workplace served, presentations and education on the topic of professional grief, as well as consultation on how to establish professional grief programs in your workplace or community bereavement center. “Our goal is to provide support to those working in high loss environments and to create a shift in how professional grief is handled within organizational systems,” Fournier explained.

“Sadly, this pandemic will only magnify the needs of healthcare professionals as they attempt to process and heal from such terrible loss,” Dr. Smith added.

To learn more about the Professional Grief Program at Michael’s Place visit <https://www.mymichaelsplace.net/professional-grief-program/>

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About Michael’s Place:

Michael’s Place is a grief support center for children, teens, adults. The organization gives those who grieve a voice to share their story, care and support to survive their loss, and hope to begin to live again. Last year, Michael’s Place provided grief support services to nearly 3000 individuals in the community at no cost.

For more information on Michael’s Place, or how you can get involved, visit www.MyMichaelsPlace.net or contact us at (231) 947-6453.

*N Greenberg, D Weston, C Hall, T Caulfield, V Williamson, K Fong, Mental health of staff working in intensive care during COVID-19, *Occupational Medicine*, kqaa220, <https://doi.org/10.1093/occmed/kqaa220>