

Healing Steps



Words of Encouragement, Hope, and Healing

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HospiceCare
for body & mind and spirit

Murphy's Law need not break you

By David McQuain

Grief and Loss Counselor

MURPHY'S LAW states, "If anything can go wrong, it will." Many griever's can relate to this adage following the death of a loved one. As if dealing with the often time intense grieving reactions were not difficult enough following the loss, it seems as if everything else in our lives begins to go wrong.

For instance, the usually reliable vehicle breaks down; household appliances fail; pipes and hoses burst causing flooding; a grease fire erupts in the frying pan; our own health deteriorates; other family, friends and pets experience illnesses and accidents; self-destructive behaviors of family members and friends intensify; financial woes pile up and the list goes on and on.

Although we perceive that more things go wrong after a death, it is probably more accurate that the following occurs:

• **First**, changes are continuously occurring throughout our lifetimes.

Some changes are problematic and disruptive while others are positive

and fulfilling. But following the death, griever's are hyper-sensitive to any changes in routine whether planned or unplanned. Often these changes are magnified out of any realistic proportion making griever's feel powerless to address them and regain control in their lives.

• **Second**, the deceased loved one is no longer available to assist when things go wrong. In the past, he/she was the one who helped "fix" the problem or provided financial/emotional support in addressing the difficulty. Their absence is now profoundly apparent.

• **Third**, many griever's are experiencing pronounced grieving reactions as they are recovering from the trauma of the loss. Reactions may include severe energy drain; emotional outbursts; inability to concentrate and focus; bouts of depression and anxiety; sleep and appetite disruptions; irritability; anger and guilty feelings, to name just a few.

Problematic tasks that once were minor inconveniences are now major physical and emotional undertakings — as daunting as

climbing Mount Everest — to a traumatized griever.

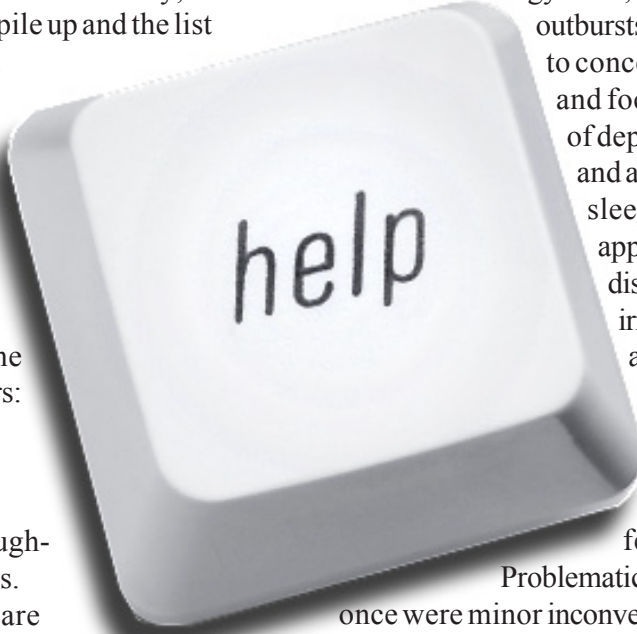
So, how can griever's help prepare themselves to cope with the inevitable problems that arise after the death? Here are a few suggestions: Adequate fluid intake, sleep, diet and exercise provide a strong barrier to buffer the physical and emotional upheavals that griever's face.

Many griever's are dehydrated at the cellular level due to the emotional "roller-coaster" they find themselves upon, yet some continue to consume caffeinated drinks that purge even more fluids from the body. Inadequate sleep promotes decreased energy levels, fatigue and concentration lapses. A basic diet low in calories, fats and sodium is beneficial but difficult to adhere to even in less stressful periods. And some basic exercise including a brisk walk will make a difference in increased energy levels and feelings of well-being.

Tackle disruptions and problems by making a plan to address them. A plan can give you a sense of control over the chaos. Plans do not have to be rigid and can be altered as circumstances and demands warrant. Planning prepares you to address issues and possibly resolve them before they spiral out of control.

Accept offers of assistance from those who want to help you in your time of need. Take advantage of offers early on following the death, because as time passes good-intentioned people have other priorities

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Men and Grief; Some reflections . . .

by *George Cantees, MS, LPC, CAC*
Grief & Loss Counselor

HAVING now worked for HospiceCare as a bereavement counselor for two years, I can't help but note the disproportionate number of referrals for counseling services for women as opposed to men. Overall, I tend to see one man for every 10 women. I have no doubt men who encounter the loss of a loved one are hurting and grieving and having similar symptoms and challenges as their female counterparts. Why is it I receive so few male referrals?

I know there are gender differences, both genetic as well as cultural, that are at play here. Men do tend to grieve differently than women. Our cultural roles make it difficult for men to look for support, and harder again to accept it when offered. Men are so often silent, solitary mourners who immerse themselves in an activity rather than seek out others for support. Men, of course, do feel profoundly, but often won't express the depth of their loss.

A "Man" is supposed to be strong, to support others, to cope well on their own, and to plan in the aftermath of loss. His own pain must be put away.

Grief doesn't discriminate between gender and culture. Our society has placed clear expectations and requirements upon our roles as men and women. Boys learn quickly what behavior is considered inappropriate through such statements as, "Stand up and take it like a man," "You're the man of the house now," and the insidiously cruel, "Big boys don't cry."

Male grief tends to have four main characteristics:

- 1. Moderated feelings** — Men have deep feelings but don't express openly, a more readily available feeling is anger. Men deal with their real feelings by themselves and by redirecting their energies.
- 2. A preference to think rather than feel** — Men work more with cognitions explaining their grief or with problem-focused strategies that help them adapt and protect others.
- 3. Problem-focused activity** — Men may adapt to loss by finding practical hands-on solutions to problems associated with the loss.
- 4. Desire for Solitude** — Men don't seek support groups. They want to master their own feelings and also reflect the more practical behavior involved in adapting to a loss.

Men are expected to be "in control" of life's demands and have to submit to the following demands society has placed on them. Men are expected to :

- remain emotionally and physically strong
- always be rational
- not cry or publicly mourn

- not ask for support or affection; be self-sufficient
- remain as non-expressive as possible
- provide, not nurture
- shake hands, not hug.

These generalizations continue to hold their power over men in pain. Let's take the old myth about crying. The truth is, it takes a truly strong man to be able to cry. Acknowledging that each of us grieve in very different ways can allow men to cope with loss and pain using their own various coping methods. We all grieve despite our gender, race or culture. We grieve because we have loved and, through our journey, we can be healed.

Tears are a gift. Grieving men need to hear that their tears are a gift to help their healing. Men have historically been denied this important gift. We need to open up to how men grieve and start sharing thoughts and feelings in a more meaningful, supportive way, giving permission to cry. I remember a study on tears that involved collecting the tears from grad students as they watched sad movies and then rushing the tears off to the lab for analysis. The results showed that tears had stress hormones in them. So when one cries, one is literally washing stress out of their bodies. That is why we feel better after a good sobbing, even though this is also painful.

Many men are probably looking for an instructional manual, a blueprint for their grief. Unfortunately, it is not that simple. Mourning is not a task to get done or a race to finish. Men, often the silent grievers, sometimes grieve their entire lives because they cannot let out their grief as it comes. It's as if they have a barrel to drain, but they only let the water out a drop at a time.

Bereavement can toss anyone's life into a whirlwind of emotions that make them feel lost. It's simply easier for women to ask for directions. Male grievers are less likely to talk about the death, cry in front of others, or seek support. This may make it seem like men have an easier time getting over death, when in reality they're most likely just more apt to hide their grief.

Men can help themselves deal with grief by:

- Having the courage to open up in front of others, even if it's just one trusted person
- Explaining the need to be alone at times
- Continuing to communicate, even if you may not want to talk about everything
- Maintaining relationships with loved ones
- Making the time to grieve without some activity, such as work
- Keeping yourself healthy with exercise when you can manage it, a good diet and enough sleep. ❖

Nurturing the spirit with song

by Terry Yahr, M.Div.
Hospice Chaplain

ARE you having difficulty talking with an ailing loved-one? Why not try singing instead. You might be surprised by the results.

People who come under hospice care frequently suffer from some sort of cognitive loss, either because of the effects of their illness or due to consequences from the treatment they are receiving. Even if they can hear us, we are not always certain that what we are saying is getting through to them. Likewise, they are not always able to communicate with us in a way that makes sense to us. They may utter words and phrases that can be clearly identified, but offer no meaning to us because of a lack of context.

Music, however, often seems to reach people in a different way, on a different level, than other forms of

communication. And particularly for people with dementia of one kind or another, music, especially singing, can reach through the fog of confusion, touch residual memory, and make an emotional, as well as a mental connection. This has been supported through clinical studies and addressed in a number of books on the subject.

As a chaplain I have frequently used old, familiar and traditional religious songs to provide spiritual care. I'll sing for anyone who wants to listen, and patients who are still alert and their loved ones who are present seem to appreciate this ministry of music. But it seems especially beneficial for people who have suffered a loss of mental capacity, with whom spoken communication is either difficult or impossible. I have seen people who are not able to communicate clearly, mouthing the words to an old hymn as I sing it, sometimes trying to sing along with me. I have seen the joy of recognition, and even a sense of understanding, on the faces of people who cannot speak at all.

For weeks during the last pre-Christmas season I sang Christmas carols nearly every day, several times a day. That wasn't because of holiday fervor or seasonal enthusiasm. It was a tool to provide spiritual care for people with a Christian background at a time of great religious significance observed by the vast majority of people in our society.

Any kind of old or otherwise familiar songs can connect with people cognitively or emotionally (for instance, songs like "You Are My Sunshine", or "Jingle Bells"). But the spiritual songs with which a person may have grown up and perhaps memorized in younger years can offer the additional benefit of refreshing faith and renewing hope in a way that other means of communication cannot. They are truly food for the soul.

And if you are not a good singer? After all, not all of us have had the advantage of many years of choir practice. Well, that really doesn't matter. The Bible urges people to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." This seems to suggest a sound that is not necessarily polished or even harmonious, but is from the heart. The listener will know and the effort will probably be appreciated. And the singer will have the comfort of knowing that he or she has provided spiritual nurturing for someone they love. ❖

GRIEF RECOVERY GROUPS

Grief recovery groups are designed for people who have experienced the loss of a loved one.

The group setting provides a "safe place" or "space for sorrow" — a place you can really be yourself, no matter how you are feeling.

You will be understood, listened to, and supported unconditionally by others who have also experienced a significant loss of a loved one.

Sometimes it just helps to know you are not alone in your grief journey and there are others who can relate to your experience. There are a variety of instructional methods used, including videos, handouts and group discussions.

HospiceCare's Grief and Loss Program also offers specialized Kids Grief Support Groups and Teen Support Groups upon request.

All support groups meet from 6-8 p.m. Tuesdays at HospiceCare's Main Office, 1606 Kanawha Blvd., W., Charleston.

To register, please call (304) 768-8523, and ask for Kathie Stout or Mike Dupay.

Upcoming Adult Groups

- ◆ Aug. 4, 11, 18 & 25 ◆ *Holiday Group*: Nov. 10,
- ◆ Sept. 8, 15, 22 & 29 17, 24, Dec. 1, 8, 15, 22 & 29
- ◆ Oct. 6, 13, 20 & 27 ◆ Jan. 5, 12, 19 & 26

To request a visit from a HospiceCare Chaplain, please call the Grief and Loss Department at (304) 768-8523.



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Murphy's Law

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and demands on their time. Do not let prideful thinking like, "I don't need anyone's help," or "I don't want to be a burden," keep you from receiving assistance from a person who would feel needed and fulfilled by helping you. Also, assistance can come in the form of counseling, support groups and medication.

Focus on the positive aspects of your life. If you expect everything to go wrong, then often it turns out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Look upon tests and challenges as a way to develop strength, success and accomplishments, which build upon one another providing confidence and momentum. There is empowerment in knowing that you are stronger than you thought, and are capable of resolving problems.

Know that this too shall pass. It could be worse. Others may be able to top your list of things that went wrong in quantity and in severity. If you have a spiritual belief system, then this is the time to rely on it for strength, clarity and guidance. Also, make room for laughter. Finding humor in all situations is good for your mental health and provides you with a sense of control in an otherwise chaotic environment. ❖



Support For Those Touched By Suicide

SADLY, many lives today are touched by the death of a loved one through suicide. This is a death which is most frequently unexpected and traumatic. HospiceCare is pleased to offer a support group to the community for those people whose lives have been touched by the "special grief" associated with suicide. Some of the benefits people receive from such a group include emotional support, spiritual support, and social support.

If you or someone you know could benefit from this type of support group, please do not hesitate to call us at (304) 768-8523 to register. This support group is open to the public and is available upon request at no charge. ❖

