

## Helping People Grieve By Just Being There

Published in *The Lakeville Journal*, July 31, 2008

Living Well

A column from SVNA by Cyd Emmons

Among the things none of us can avoid is grief. If we love and value others we are, at some point, bound to experience loss. Mourning, the ritualized acknowledgement of a death, will vary according to the deceased's religious traditions or personal philosophy. Grief, however, has no set ritual. It is internal and intensely personal, and the way each of us experiences it and travels through it is as individual as we are. And, in fact, we should not try to avoid it. Grief is a necessary process that can lead us out of despair.

David McArthur, MSW, a medical social worker with Salisbury Visiting Nurse Association, understands grief. He is an integral part of SVNA's interdisciplinary hospice care team, which provides terminally ill patients and their caregivers with the physical, emotional and spiritual support they need at the end of life. He also facilitates an ongoing, weekly bereavement support group where people coping with grief can come together with others who are in a similar circumstance.

"People have a tendency to isolate themselves," McArthur said. While taking time to grieve in private is understandable, McArthur's task in the group is, he said, "to help them talk, let down their guard and express their emotions.

"It's perfectly natural to feel overwhelmed, sad, hurt, and confused," McArthur continued. "Otherwise, you're in denial. It's important that you recognize these feelings and let them out."

He sees in his group at least some of the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance—described by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death And Dying*. While Kubler-Ross proposed the five stages in regard to facing one's own impending death, it soon became clear that they apply to the survivors as well. "People can, of course, get very depressed," McArthur said, "and you have to get past that to come to acceptance. Each of us has to find his own way to adjust."

### Memories Remain

A recent death sometimes triggers thoughts of earlier losses, McArthur said. "You have to accept that there is no way of bringing any of them back. What you do have are memories, pictures, maybe offspring, keepsakes."

What possessions you decide to keep are up to you, he said. "As long as it doesn't interfere with your life, it's okay. If you want to keep your spouse's clothes, keep them. If the time comes when you want to give them away, that's fine, too." Likewise, there is no set time when grieving ends. It takes as long as it takes.

Doing what feels right to you is key. There is no one way. "Some people are very stoic," he said. "It's not that they don't feel things. They just tend not to show it. If you express your emotions very openly, that's what works for you. Ask for what you want. Be selfish. Let some time pass."

## Be There

It is often difficult for the bereaved to even identify, much less ask for, the help they want or need. If you're a concerned friend or family member go ahead and ask, but if you see something that needs doing, do it. If the kitchen needs to be cleaned up, clean it. If the garden needs weeding, weed it. If the dog needs walking, walk it.. Listen, but don't try to fix it. Don't push. Just be there.

McArthur also leads a support group that meets at Noble Horizons for caregivers, particularly those whose loved ones are suffering from Alzheimer's or other forms of dementia. For more information about either the bereavement support or caregiver's support groups call David McArthur or Eileen Rydel at SVNA, 860-435-0816. Both groups are open to anyone in the community and are offered free of charge.