

Grief programs provide bereaved with support, hope

By Vanessa Orr

Losing a loved one is one of the most difficult things that can happen in a person's life. And although everyone grieves differently, having the help and support of people who have been through the same experience can often make the experience a little easier.

There are a number of organizations in Western Pennsylvania that offer this form of support. The Good Grief Center in Squirrel Hill has been helping grieving individuals find resources to cope with loss for the past nine years. The center offers peer support free of charge, an extensive lending library, and a database of therapists who deal with grief. The Good Grief Center also offers fee-based programs on dealing with grief in the workplace, follow-up care for families once other services have stopped, and a sympathy care package as an alternative to flowers.



Lulu Orr

"Every single person will experience grief at some point in his or her life, and it doesn't matter how old a person is, where he or she lives, or what type of job or income that person has," explained Lulu Orr, executive director, the Good Grief Center. "In fact, most people will likely have to deal with grief more than once."

As a former hospice nurse, Orr saw a need in the community for a place where grieving individuals and families could go for support. "Most people don't know how to find the resources they need," she explained. The center has a database of more than 150 different peer support

groups, and can find the right fit for a person, whether they need a group based on the type of loss they've experienced, the location of a group's meetings, or the time a group meets.

"Grief really does affect everybody, which is why there are so many groups out there," said Orr. "While some people choose to grieve privately, others may need the support of others in similar situations."

"When people have a hard time with grief, they sometimes think that there is something wrong with them," she added. "But they need to understand that grief is a part of life, and that if they need to reach out, that's okay. Other people have survived similar loss, and have become stronger and healthier moving forward."

Staff and trained volunteers meet with clients and provide peer support over the phone. In addition to a licensed counselor, social worker and nurse on staff, approximately 46 volunteers are available to reach out to those in need. "Every single one of our volunteers has come to us because of a grief experience in his or her own life," said Orr. "They often say that they wish they'd had someplace like this when they were grieving."

Since opening its doors, the Good Grief Center has helped more than 30,000 people. "Some people come once because they feel the need to tell their story and

then are ready to move on; others may stay in a support group for a year or more," said Orr. "Some people come for a while, then stop, and then return when something triggers their pain, like another death or the holidays."

Just as adults grieve differently, so do children. The Highmark Caring Place, with locations in Pittsburgh, Erie, central Pennsylvania and Cranberry, provides help to families with grieving children. "The main thing we do is provide a peer support group program, which brings children and families who have lost a family member together with other families who have been through the same experience," explained Director Terese Vorsheck. "We want them to know that they are not alone in their grief; they can share their feelings and memories with others who have gone through something similar."

While the program is primarily focused on children, there are services for adults as well. "It's important for parents to take care of themselves so that they can be there for their children as they grieve," said Vorsheck.

Children are unique in that, unlike adults, they can't grieve for long periods of time. "When we first started the Caring Place in 1997, there was a misconception that children didn't grieve because they grieve differently than adults," explained Vorsheck. "A child might go to his father's funeral, and then come home and play basketball in the yard, leaving the surviving parent to wonder if the child either doesn't understand what's going on, or doesn't really miss his father."

"The fact is, children's feelings are as intense, but they can't hold onto grief for as long as adults," she continued. "Children don't have the coping mechanisms or cognitive ability to stay with their grief for long periods of time."

Through Highmark Caring Place's volunteer- and education-based programs, communities learn how to understand the needs of grieving children and get them the help they need. Families are able to better cope and find hope in the future. "Research on delinquency, behavioral problems and mental health disorders often show a link to unresolved grief issues," Vorsheck added. "By teaching children to cope with grief early on, we are hopefully helping them avoid these issues in the future." All services are provided at no cost to families who have lost a child.



Compassionate Friends is a self-help support group that also deals with individuals who have lost a child. "While you may expect to lose your spouse or parents, we are not supposed to survive our children," explained Betty Robson, a 21-year volunteer who works in the office and in outreach for the organization. "The death of a child is out of the natural order of things."

Compassionate Friends holds a general meeting once a month, and also has home meetings two times a month. There are special sharing groups for parents whose children have committed suicide, who have been murdered, and who have been in auto accidents, as well as groups for fathers and for siblings older than 16.

"When a child dies, it's very powerful, difficult and life-changing," said Robson. "You'll never see that child grow up. Often, people don't know what to do, and even wonder how they can survive the death of their child. We want them to know that while they will never be the same, they can find new meaning in life."

For information on the Good Grief Center, call 412-224-4700 or visit www.goodgriefcenter.com. For information on the Highmark Caring Place, visit www.highmarkcaringplace.com or call 1-888-224-4673 in Pittsburgh or 1-888-734-4073 in Cranberry. For information on Compassionate Friends, call 412-835-1105 or visit www.tcfpittsburgh.org. T