

Grief -- A necessary and natural part of life

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By Jill Daly, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Law enforcement officers and firefighters really know how to grieve as a community: from black bands over their badges to processions of vehicles with flashing lights bearing thousands of uniformed men and women.

Many Pittsburghers are sharing strong feelings of grief with the family and friends of the three city police officers killed April 4 in Stanton Heights, and that's not unusual, said Lulu Orr, founder and executive director of the Good Grief Center for Bereavement Support, and Marilyn Chapla, the center's associate director.

They said the city did the right thing by involving the entire community in the mourning: the public visitation Wednesday and Thursday, and the funeral procession and the memorial service Thursday.

"These are three of our police When people there to protect and serve us are shot and killed, it affects us," said Ms. Orr, who recalled similar nationwide grief suffered after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the Columbine and Virginia Tech school shootings.

When the events are covered, seemingly nonstop, on TV and in the newspapers, it's impossible to avoid thinking about it, Ms. Orr and Ms. Chapla said.

Feelings of sympathy for the families who have lost the officers and resurfaced feelings of grief for their own past losses are expected and are not necessarily bad, they said. It's all part of building a more compassionate community, part of the grief center's mission.

"[People are] feeling sad, but they're not sure why," Ms. Orr said. "They get teary, anxious, they can't sleep, or they sleep too much."

People calling the center this week said they felt for the officers' loved ones.

"They say, 'I know what's ahead for these families,'" Ms. Orr said. After the shock will come harder times of grief.

Free, long-term support is what the grief center is all about -- since 2001, more than 20,000 people have contacted the peer-support volunteers at the nonprofit center at 2717 Murray Ave., Squirrel Hill.

"We're here for the long haul," Ms. Orr said. "It might be weeks or months until someone is willing or able to share with someone or talk about their feelings."

There's no timeline for grief, Ms. Chapla added. It could be two years after a loss when new difficulties might arise.

How should adults explain the police tragedy to children?

"You always have to reassure them that they are safe ... their imaginations can go off," Ms. Chapla said. She and Ms. Orr had other tips:

- Do a lot of listening.
- Let the children talk about their concerns.
- Allow them to ask questions.

They say that when children have suffered a loss, don't think that because they ask a lot of questions and then go out to play that they're over it. If they come back with new questions, it's normal. Children go in and out of grief.

It's the same with adults, said Ms. Orr: "Talk about their stories, their fears and concerns."

In addition to the early responses of family visits and donated meals, Ms. Chapla suggested helping others in grief by sending a note of condolence: "Tell them how you feel. Even children can write a letter or draw a picture."

People suffering from their loss need to allow others to help them, as well, she said.

"You're giving them a gift; many people want to help."

Those who are prompted to honor the three city officers might do anything from pausing on the street as the funeral procession passed to helping with the fundraising for victims' families, Ms. Chapla said.

"Maybe it's a good thing to thank an officer," Ms. Orr said, in honor of slain Officers Paul J. Sciullo II, Eric G. Kelly and Stephen J. Mayhle.

"A great example of what we don't do well, the police and fire departments figured out years ago," Ms. Orr said. "To honor their brothers and sisters in their professional lives, they need to drop everything and grieve."

Ms. Chapla pointed out that the community will recover, in the way people learn to enjoy life again after a loss.

"As [Mayor Ravenstahl] said, we will get through this."

Here's an important thing to remember, she said: "Grief is a natural part of life."

For more information, see www.goodgriefcenter.com or call 412-224-4700.

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