



HEALTHY WAYS OF COPING WITH LOSS

By Liz Field

On July 6, the Ithaca Journal ran a headline story about Jean Stevens, a ninety-one year old woman in Pennsylvania who kept the deceased bodies of her twin sister and husband in her home and garage, respectively. Her sister had passed away in October 2009, while her husband had died in 1999. The article said she'd had the bodies exhumed within a couple of days of burial, and brought to her house. Every day, she would visit with her loved ones and talk to them, even dress her sister up and do her make-up and hair. She told reporters, "Death is very hard for me to take."

Here at Hospicare, we strive to help people find healthy ways of coping with loss and grief. Donna George, one of our Bereavement Counselors, commented that while the case mentioned above doesn't tell the full story, it's obvious that the woman has an inability to move on. "If I was interviewing her," George says, "I would first want to know what she misses the most about her loved ones, because having the bodies doesn't bring that back."

George went on to say that there are many healthy ways that grieving people can memorialize a loved one. Some people create a fund in a loved one's name such as a special scholarship fund or an account that will help remaining family members. Other families may hold benefits or fundraisers in a loved one's name for causes that were special to the deceased, or that help fund research or cures for diseases such as AIDS or cancer. "Mira's Movement is a wonderful example of a family who found a healthy way to memorialize their loved one," George says. Mira's Movement is a local advocacy organization dedicated to generating awareness of childhood cancers and helping to raise money for research. Many people also donate to Hospicare as a way to memorialize their loved one.

Other healthy ways of grieving, George says, are taking care of yourself by eating right, exercising and getting enough sleep. "Grief is a fluid emotion that can be one way one moment

and another the next,” George explains. “Some people report feeling crazy, like they are literally losing their minds. Taking care of your body can help maintain balance.” Journaling or writing letters also helps, as does gardening. A small flower bed or pot with the deceased loved one’s favorite flower or color helps to memorialize a loved one.

Grief is individual and we can’t put a regimented timeframe on it. We shouldn’t expect anyone, including ourselves, to feel “normal” after a certain amount of time. “We don’t often allow people to express their feelings,” George says. “However, it’s important to remember that for people who are expressing their grief through feelings such as anger that it’s okay to feel that way, and to try and find ways to release that energy, like exercising or yelling in the shower. Crying is another great way to grieve, though not everyone is a crier.”

George points out that it can be beneficial to find help outside immediate family members and other grievers. Hospicare offers many different services for grieving people. We offer a number of support groups: a drop in bereavement group for adults that meets on the first and third Wednesdays of the month; support groups for bereaved parents; many Good Grief programs for children and their caregivers; and monthly breakfast and lunch grief groups. Additionally we offer individual counseling, a resource library, and our web site provides many links to articles and resources. These resource are provided free of charge to anyone in the community regardless of whether or not their loved one received hospice services with us.

It’s important for us all to develop healthy relationships with and outside our immediate family. George says, “If Ms. Stevens had formed healthy relationships with other people, she may have dealt with this differently.”

More information on healthy grief can be found at:

<http://www.hospicare.org/for-those-grieving-a-loss/>

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