



NONVERBAL WAYS OF PROCESSING GRIEF

By Liz Field

When we lose a loved one, we each experience grief in our own unique ways. For most people, talk therapy—either in groups or individually—helps them through the grief process. For others, such as a seven-year-old girl who recently lost a parent, talk therapy can be difficult or even impossible. Kira Lallas, Hospicare’s Hospice and Community Bereavement Counselor, says “Most of our programs are geared toward talking about grief, but it’s not how everyone processes grief, especially kids.”

Lallas coordinates Hospicare’s Good Grief program for children, and also works with teens and adults to help each individual process their grief in their own way. The girl she worked with had a hard time talking about her parent, but she could put her feelings to pictures. Lallas would give her a prompt or a question and her response would be a drawing. Lallas explains, “Her drawings gave a language to her feelings and we began to speak through her drawings. She could then describe her picture as a kind of metaphor for feelings, being able to communicate what she couldn’t say before, until she could tell the stories in her own words.”

Hospicare offers many services to bereaved family members, including a regular drop-in group, a bereaved parents support group, a monthly Tuesday lunch group and Wednesday breakfast group. We also offer six-week long grief sessions and individual therapy. But for people who have a hard time talking about grief, such as the girl Lallas counseled, Hospicare is now offering three programs to help bereaved children and adults work through their grief in nonverbal ways. These programs incorporate sharing about grief without making talk therapy the main focal point.

On Thursday evenings July 1 and 8, and again on August 5 and 12, Hospicare is offering “Gardening Your Grief” for children ages five to twelve and their families, led by Lallas and Hospicare gardener Joe Smellow. “We’ll use the garden and grounds to have fun while reflecting on loved ones who have died and our experiences of grief. We’ll pick and arrange flowers, take walks, and use found objects to create natural sculpture in honor of a loved one,

and use that to reflect on the life cycle, on our loved ones and on feelings of grief,” says Lallas. The Hospicare grounds include a vegetable garden, beautifully landscaped stone pathways, a pond and hiking trails. Participants will do a project together and be invited to share about their experience.

On July 31, local professional storyteller Regi Carpenter will lead a workshop for grieving children and their families. She will tell stories about death and grief that provide a context to see death and grief as ancient and natural processes. Lallas says the program will also help children feel less isolated as it gives them a chance to meet other children who have experienced a loss. The stories are pulled from many different traditions, which help kids relate to the huge spectrum of humankind and how children have dealt with loss over time. Kids will also have a chance to create and tell their own stories. “While the program will include a verbal component, it also focuses heavily on the imagination,” Lallas explains.

For adults, Hospicare is offering four open art sessions in July and August. Adults can come to one, some or all four sessions, offered Thursday evenings July 15, 22 and August 19 and 26. “Sometimes with a sudden loss or if there is trauma involved people can’t even say their loved one’s name, let alone talk about what they are feeling and experiencing,” Lallas says. The open art sessions will give grieving adults the chance to process and communicate their experience in a way that words cannot. Participants can feel free to talk about their grief, or not. Hospicare will provide basic art materials.

Lallas creates these programs in order to help individuals and families with different grieving methods get the help they need. “Children often express grief through play and art,” Lallas says, “but we don’t always offer programs to adults that allow them to express their grief non-verbally.”

In addition to our summer programming, anyone who is grieving the loss of a loved one is welcome to come stroll the grounds at the Hospicare center at 172 E. King Road in the Town of Ithaca. “Meditation can be another effective way of working with grief,” Lallas says. “Sometimes feelings of grief are in not wanting a certain experience, like the death of someone we love, to be occurring. Meditation can help us be with what is happening instead of fighting it.”

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