

In last week's article, I shared some of the psychological responses characteristic of a person who is grieving the loss of a loved one. These included the use of coping mechanisms and the emotional reactions.

Recognizing that each person grieves in their own unique way, there are some general physical reactions that are common such as:

- Challenges with sleep - this can be one extreme or another. Either they have difficulty sleeping or may want to sleep all the time.
- Appetite changes - can also be extreme. A significant decrease or increase in appetite is not uncommon.
- Absent-mindedness – they may misplace things like car-keys or lose track of time and miss a regular meeting.
- Isolation – people who are grieving sometimes just want to withdraw from the social scene or family gatherings.
- Anxiety – they may act out of character when they interact in crowds or social settings. Likewise, they may fear being left alone.
- Dreams – having dreams of the person who died could be related to good times or may be about reliving the death.
- Searching – trying to understand or find the reason for the person's death.
- Over-activity – trying to fill the void in their life by being overly busy or over-committing their time and energy.
- Crying – sometimes the simplest or most subtle thing can trigger tears. Other times, they may simply cry without any form of prompt.

For the support person or close family member, it can be challenging to know what to say, how to act, or how to provide support. In fact, you may be grieving the loss yourself and unable to provide the support you normally would.

When my husband and I lost our 8 year old daughter, I vividly remember a conversation I had with one of my co-workers. He shared his condolences with me and then went on to say, *"Deb, don't hold anyone hostage to what they don't or can't say. Anyone who is a parent can't handle the tragedy you have experienced. We can't wrap our brains and hearts around it because it is just too scary. Instead, you may feel people distance themselves from you. Try not to be hurt or angry by that. They just can't 'go there'."*

I think that advice applies to all of us. Each of us has a friend or family member who has lost a loved one. We may not know what to say or what to do. It is important that we recognize that about ourselves and tackle only the level of support we can handle.

Here are some suggestions on how you can help others grieve:

- 1) Stay away from clichés. Saying phrases like “Heaven must have needed another angel” or “Time heals all wounds” may be a comfort to you, but provide less comfort to the person who is grieving. Saying nothing or admitting you don’t know what to say are better alternatives.
- 2) Don’t tell them you know how they feel unless you have lost someone in the same situation. For example, if you haven’t lost a spouse or partner, saying you know how they feel is offensive.
- 3) Don’t compare grief. Too many times I have heard people share with me that losing a spouse is harder than any kind of loss or losing a parent is the hardest thing you will ever do. Every person grieves a death differently. The only thing that may be similar is that they are, indeed, grieving. When people tell me that losing a child has to be the hardest cause of grief, I would always counter by saying “When you’re in the darkness of grief, it doesn’t matter what put you there... it’s still dark.”
- 4) Don’t put up verbal road blocks to their grief. Complimenting them on how well they are doing or telling them they need to be strong for others only encourages them to suppress how they feel even more. They need to feel that they can grieve openly and honestly.
- 5) Be a great listener. This may mean that you sit quietly for minutes or hours letting them talk until they stop and cry until they can’t cry. It’s not an easy place to be, but true friends do their best work in the listening mode.
- 6) Don’t forget them as time goes on. We get back in our groove much more quickly than those who are closest to the deceased. It is important to continue to visit and call on them. Grieving can be a very lonely process and having people drop in or drop a line is very important in to the process.
- 7) Don’t be surprised if there are relapses. It may be months or a year since the death of a loved one when you may see the bereaved take a few emotional steps backwards. They will need to be there whenever it happens.

Grieving is hard work. It drains a person physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As a support person, you will feel some of the same stressors. Taking care of yourself is another important thing you can do to help your friend or family member walk through the ‘darkness’ that comes with grieving. Maintain your own health and wellness to be better help to them.

Being aware of the psychological reactions common to grieving as well as just being there will help you help the grieving.

For more information about grief and loss, contact me at the Geary County Extension Office 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!