



GriefConnections

Volume 6, Issue 1

January 2010

The Future is Here: The Internet and Bereavement Support William G. Hoy

Just yesterday, my wife and I were discussing the possibility of using the salted butter on hand in our refrigerator instead of the unsalted variety called for in a recipe. I “googled” my question and within a few seconds had two or three well-reasoned answers to our dilemma (yes, you can use it but you should reduce the other salt in the recipe!) But once again, I was reminded how the internet has become, for many of us, the go-to resource for all kinds of issues, especially important in a mobile society where the usual sources, (mom or grandma living nearby) to which one might have traditionally gone, are simply not readily available.

Last Spring at the annual meeting of the Association for Death Education and Counseling, Carla Sofka joined with a handful of colleagues and I in a symposium to ponder how funerals help with the grief process. But based on her research and passions, her unique contribution to the discussion was how the internet has changed the ways we memorialize our dead.

Of course, this topic has held rich interest for me for several years. One of my ongoing research projects has been an exploration of how people make meaning through their posts to online obituary “guest books” after the unexpected death of a young adult. It has long been posited that one benefit to online chat rooms, remembrance pages, and other internet-based resources is that it affords a level of anonymity not possible with live support groups or personal interactions with mental health professionals.

So how does the internet help us provide better support to bereaved people and what are some of the pitfalls to its use? Certainly, bereavement-related websites that offer a plethora of information on virtually every possible grief-related topic can provide access to a wide range of people not otherwise able to access traditional bereavement services.

One of the most important needs for bereaved people is what we commonly call *normalization* (see the “Research That Matters” feature). Isolated as we often are from support networks and our own “history of coping,” bereaved people are prone to believe the oft-heard maxium, “I’m losing my mind.” While relatively few bereaved people seem to have ever actually “lost their mind,” the strange experiences, feelings, and physical realities of grief, paired with the lack of concentration and the memory-failure so common in the process, one would reasonably reach that conclusion.

Whether in a support group, the knowing and reassuring nod of an experienced caregiver, or a helpful pamphlet accessed on the internet, bereaved people seem to be aided by realizing their experiences are normal. If the bereaved person can be reasonably assured she is getting correct information from the website accessed, her anxiety is likely to be reduced by helpful psycho-educational information. Once upon a time, we might have been most likely to ask a clergyman, check out a book from the library (if we could find one), or simply ask friends with similar experiences. With an internet-connected computer available in well over half of North American homes today, people have an extra “network” with whom to consult. Since the internet is not limited to office hours, its use can be particularly convenient for people who are taking time to consider their grief late at night or on the weekend.

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Chat rooms, a virtual type of bereavement group, have also been reported by some bereaved people to be useful in their experience. Because members of the group either post comments on one-another's questions, or actually interact in real time through an online group assembled at a particular time, some of the benefits of a traditional bereavement group can be realized. And there is no shortage of such forums; a recent internet search returned more than a quarter million "hits" to the term "bereavement chat room." Cutting through the clutter, however, is another matter.

Not all groups (perhaps not even most groups) are moderated by a knowledgeable person who can spot pathology and refer troubled group members to additional resources. And even for seasoned professionals, conducting such assessments without the ability to read body language and personal appearance may jeopardize the reliability and helpfulness of the assessment and referrals. Clearly, the anonymous nature of internet communication is a knife that cuts both ways, perhaps providing better unfettered access and relative freedom from stigma, but also making it very difficult to see unfolding or underlying psychopathology.

What is clear is that a growing number of bereaved people want to access bereavement support materials on the internet. Providing materials directly on your site or linking from your website to websites of other organizations can be extremely helpful for the people who visit your online presence.

I have just completed teaching an online grad school seminar, an experience for me with an extremely steep "learning curve." In spite of great technology and some clearly positive benefits (no stated office hours!), it is clear this means of education is not going to replace the live classroom, continuing education seminar, or conference any time soon. But I am equally reminded that many (if not most) of my students would have been unable to make the investment of resources and time away from family to pursue graduate studies in a conventional program. For these people and many like them, discovering, evaluating, and linking to good internet based resources seems both kind and helpful.

Reference.

Martin, T.L. & Doka, K. J. (1999). *Men don't cry, women do: Transcending gender stereotypes of grief*. London: Brunner Mazel.

The Author: William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. For more than 25 years, Dr. Hoy has counseled with bereaved individuals and families, and over the last several years, has been primarily involved in writing and presenting continuing education workshops for caregiving professionals. He is the author of *Guiding People through Grief*, and his newest book, *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*. This fall, he is teaching the bereavement and spirituality course in the graduate program in bereavement and leadership at Marian University.

Research that Matters

Dominick, S.A., Irvine, B.A., Beauchamp, N., Seeley, J.R., Nolen-Hoeksema, S., Doka, K.J., & Bonanno, G.A. (2009/10). An internet tool to normalize grief. *Omega: Journal of Death, Dying and Bereavement*, 60 (7), 71-87.

As the lead article in this month's *GriefConnections* suggests, the internet promises many innovative ways to support bereaved people. Those of us who worked with the bereaved in a pre-web world, however, often still have our misgivings. The researchers who conducted this study, based at the Oregon Center for Applied Sciences, along with a handful of other bereavement pioneers (like Ken Doka and George Bonanno), however, suggest that the internet offers some promising ways to better help bereaved people.

This study was narrowly defined to minimize the number of confounding variables. The researchers developed an interactive website entitled "Making Sense of Grief" and then guided the study participants in their use of it. Several of their conclusions bear reporting. Not surprising to long-term bereavement caregivers, one of the greatest benefits to participants was the normalization of their experiences, a concept well-known in research and clinical experience.

Research that Matters con't

The website also taught participants about various grieving styles (Martin & Doka, 1999). Based on this pioneering work, the web materials helped bereaved participants better understand various grieving styles and complete a self-assessment to determine their own style. This material was judged by participants to be one of the most helpful aspects of the program, a fact that has been borne out in other settings where this information is shared.

Of course, the present study was limited in scope, necessitating further examination before applying it to all groups of grieving people. In fact, the participants were largely white (73.1%) women (86.6%) who had experienced the death of an older relative by natural causes in the prior six months. Three-fourths of the respondents were employed, and more than four-fifths used the internet at least five days weekly.

Nevertheless, the study offers ideas for supplementary internet-based resources for internet-savvy bereaved people who are already leading busy lives, a difficult group to attract to conventional bereavement support groups. This study made no pretense of attempting to examine long-term outcomes for bereaved people. However, the participants' overwhelmingly positive evaluation of the materials and their helpfulness points to the importance of sound psycho-educational materials being made available online.

Memory Quilt 2010



For the past few years, the Grief Center of the Southern Tier has created a Memory Quilt to memorialize community and family members who passed away the previous year. The Memory Quilts are displayed annually at the Candlelight Service of Remembrance. The quilts are a way for grieving individuals to express that their loved ones are gone from their lives but are not forgotten. Each quilt block is unique. The quilt blocks contain the person's name, date of birth, date person passed away, and one or two things that are special about or special to the person. A few of the quilt blocks are pictured.

If you would like to design and sew a quilt block in memory of a loved one as a part of this year's Memory Quilt, please contact the Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077, Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or Carpenters Funeral Home at 607-936-9927. A Memory Quilt packet will be sent to you. All quilt squares must be completed and returned no later than September 13, 2010.

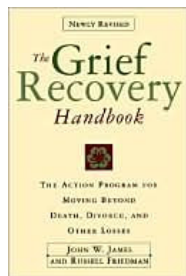
In-service Programs for Your Organization

Did you know that we can provide an in-service speaker for your organization? Whether you are looking for a group presentation on some aspect of grief counseling or a program on today's funeral options, we have an excellent group of speakers ready to respond. To talk about options for a workshop in your organization, please call Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or email info@phillipsfuneralhome.com.

Do you know someone who would benefit from receiving this newsletter?

Want to receive *GriefConnections* in your email box every month—absolutely free! Simply send an email to; griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com and write SUBSCRIBE TO GRIEF CONNECTIONS in the subject line.

Library Notes



James, John W., Friedman, Russell. *The Grief Recovery Handbook. The action program for moving beyond death, divorce and other losses.*

From the publisher, "Incomplete recovery from grief can have a life-long negative effect on your capacity for happiness. Drawing from their own histories, as well as from others, the authors illustrate what grief is and how it is possible to recover and regain energy and spontaneity. Based on a proven program, now extensively revised, *The Grief Recovery Handbook* offers grievers the specific actions needed to complete the grieving process and accept loss. For those ready to regain a sense of aliveness, the principles outlined here make this a life-changing handbook."

To purchase a copy of *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, stop in or call the Special Memories Card & Gift Shop located at Phillips Funeral Home, 17 West Pulteney Street, Corning, 607-936-9212.

Upcoming Events

Loss of a Spouse Support Group

Wednesdays at 6:30 pm at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, 150 Victory Highway, Painted Post. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Loss of a Loved One to Suicide

First and third Thursdays of each month at 7 pm at the Hand in Hand Methodist Church on Wardell Street, Elmira. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Compassionate Friends Support Group

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at jmorgan55@stny.rr.com.

Infant Loss

Empty Arms, Healing Hearts is a support group centered around infant loss through miscarriage. For more information, contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

Abortion

Forgiven and Set Free—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

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