



GriefConnections

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Community in Bereavement: Bridging Research & Practice

by William Hoy

Recent research studies have borne out what clinicians have known intuitively for many years—there is a decided difference between the way people resolve losses when they are connected to a supportive community and those bereaved people who do not have such effective social support. While good social networks do not prevent all complication in the bereavement process, the right support from the right people seems to be an effective tool in managing crises and loss.

A Finnish study from a few years ago interviewed 52 bereaved mothers, revealing that the study participants felt most supported by family and close friends. Interviews and surveys conducted at least one year after the child's death showed evidence of greater personal growth, less blame and anger, and less disorganization for the mothers who had good personal support versus the mothers who had little personal support or received only professional assistance.

The mothers in this study overwhelmingly reported that, if they were in a support group, they wanted it to be a support group of parents with similar experiences since in their opinion, only fellow sufferers would understand the experience of losing a child. The negative support reported by these mothers consisted primarily of interference from other family members and the dissolution of long-time friendships (Laakson & Paunonen-Ilmonen, 2002).

Howard Stone and colleagues (Stone, Cross, Purvis & Young, 2004) at the Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University conducted a study a few years ago of how church members supported each other during crisis. Like other studies, Stone and his colleagues found that the social support afforded by active involvement in a faith community was a strong buffer against many of the long term negative effects of the crisis. Reflecting on the ways their interviewees felt supported by the community, the presence of caring friends spoke volumes. The researchers wrote,

One of the most striking themes of the interviews in our sample was the immediate and profound impact of these (acts of kindness). Indeed, the simplest acts—merely showing up at the grieving person's house and doing the dishes, for example—appear to be the most profoundly helpful to those in crisis.

In the congregation studied, every active member belonged to a shepherd group, a small "family" of 20 to 30 people with a trained leader. On a number of occasions reported by the interviewees, members of the person's shepherd group actually arrived at the hospital or home before the subject's own family members.

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The “acts of kindness” were first seen by the researchers as helpful because they removed some of the “burden” of the crisis so that the subject could focus on more pressing needs. “Soon, however, we became aware that they were perceived as acts of solidarity or support—a physical way of expressing concern, love, and care,” Stone and colleagues wrote.

A third study pointing to the efficacy of social support was one engaged in by Lauren Vanderwerker and Holly Prigerson at the Yale University School of Medicine. In their study (Vanderwerker & Prigerson, 2004), 293 bereaved individuals were interviewed during the first year after the death. While Vanderwerker and Prigerson were examining the role of technologically advanced systems for support (ie cellular telephone and internet use), the study conclusively demonstrated that overall social support was protective against Major Depressive Disorder, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Complicated Grief (now proposed for the revision of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders* [DSM-V] as *Prolonged Grief Disorder*) as well as being associated with an overall better quality of life.

Interestingly, the word often used to describe these kinds of technologies—“connectivity”—implies the presence of and importance of social support. Vanderwerker and Prigerson demonstrate amply the important benefits to bereaved people of such technologies as online grief support chatrooms and the ready accessibility to others that cellular phone service provides, making it possible to largely banish isolation. With the rapid growth of Facebook and other social networking sites since the publication of this study, one might infer this technological support factor has become even greater.

Swedish researchers (Benkel, Wijk, & Molander, 2009) interviewed spouses, adult children, siblings and friends of deceased palliative care patients. Study participants were interviewed shortly after the death and again at one year post-loss. Confirming earlier studies, survivors indicated they both needed and generally received good support from family members and friends. Those who described dysfunctional or non-existent support networks tended to need more professional support than those who had functional support systems in place before the death.

For those of us who provide care to bereaved people, these studies provide conclusive evidence. Our work with bereaved people is most effective when we help them connect—with families, friendship circles, faith communities, and support groups of people who have experienced similar losses. Indeed, grief is not intended to be a solitary, isolated issue. We are made for community, and we grieve best when that loss is supported by a network of social support.

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The Author: William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. In addition to walking through significant losses of his own, Dr. Hoy has counseled grieving individuals and families for more than 25 years. He is the author of *Guiding People through Grief* and *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*. His newest book, *Called to Care: Navigating a Life of Care for Others* will be published later this year. He teaches in the graduate program in bereavement and leadership at Marian University and oversees the counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice.

\$14,562 Raised at the Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention Walk



According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "In the United States, a person dies by suicide every 16 minutes, claiming more than 33,000 lives each year. It is estimated that an attempt is made every minute; with close to one million people attempting suicide annually."

To help raise community awareness about suicide prevention and to help save lives, Sandi Follette, Executive Director for the Grief Center of the Southern Tier headed up the Out of the Darkness Community Walk sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) on Saturday, September 11, 2010 at Craig Park in Painted Post, NY. This year was the 2nd annual event.

The event began with a program. It included special speakers and a soloist. One of the speakers was a local woman who experienced the loss of her son through suicide. Lois Michaelowski shared her experience of how her son's suicide impacted her life. She shared how she joined a GriefShare support group and how the Lord Jesus Christ has given her healing and hope for the future.

Following the program, the group walked a total of 3 miles. Donations were received from local businesses and a raffle was held to raise money. The event was closed with a touching Memorial Service in memory of the family members and friends that were lost to suicide.

This year \$14,562 was raised by the Out of the Darkness Walk. All funds raised from the Walk go to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) to do research and to educate people in order to prevent suicide and help save lives, increase national awareness about depression and suicide, advocate for mental health issues, and assist survivors of suicide loss.

Donations are still being received. If you would like to donate, donations can be made to AFSP, (be sure to include Painted Post, New York in your correspondence in the memo line), 120 Wall Street,

Memorial Quote

There is a sacredness in tears. They are not the mark of weakness, but of power. They speak more eloquently than ten thousand tongues. They are messengers of overwhelming grief, of deep contrition, and of unspeakable love.

Washington Irving

Inservice Programs for Your Organization

Did you know that we can provide an inservice 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.

Email Encouragement

An organization called GriefShare supplies daily emails of encouragement for those who are going through the grieving process. To sign up online, go to:

<http://dailyemails.griefshare.org/dailyemails/>

Upcoming Events

November 20, 2010—National Survivors of Suicide Day. Event to be held at the North Presbyterian Church in Elmira, New York. More details to follow.

November 28, 2010—Candlelight Service of Remembrance. Service held at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church in Painted Post, New York. More details to follow.

Support Groups

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.

Abortion

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

Infant Loss

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Maryanne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

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