

You're Not Going Nuts, You're Grieving

By Ann Geagan, MSW, LICSW

"I think I'm going nuts!"

That's how people often explain why they are calling to get grief counseling. A loved one has died, sometimes after months or years of caregiving, often suddenly and unexpectedly. Now funeral services are over, condolence cards are down to a trickle and friends call less often. And the person in grief is facing the reality of life without their loved one. The fog of shock has lifted and they are feeling lost, uncertain and deeply sad.

When the grieving person shares their feelings with friends and family, they often are given well-meaning advice: keep busy, volunteer, focus on the good memories, get out more. To the person in grief, all they hear is: "You are not doing all you can to get over this. It's time to move on!" This creates a greater sense of being alone in grief.

That's when I get a call.

I like to explain to the person in grief that, as their grief counselor, I will listen to their story unedited. I will not correct their memories or perceptions, give them untimely advice, compare their loss to mine or make them feel good with easy fixes.

What I will do is hear their whole story, from wherever they wish to begin, and will listen to it over and over again until it's explored in detail—and together we'll examine all of the questions that emerge from the telling.

I will not interrupt them or change the subject when they start to cry or express anger or hurt. I'll be curious about their loved one, ask to hear about their life together and, if they wish, look at photo albums and videos. I will share in the bittersweet joy of their memories.

I'll explain and track the grief process so that the grieving person can begin to believe that their pain is not always going to be so intense, that aches, pains, irritability and restlessness are all normal effects of grief. I'll encourage them to take care of themselves physically, eat well, and get a good night's sleep and healthy exercise. I'll give them suggestions on books to read and resources available in the community.

We will work together to identify their internal strengths and resilience, as well as their external support such as friends, family, faith communities and interests. We'll talk about what the loss means to them, how they can find new meaning in their lives and a new sense of themselves. But we will do that slowly and carefully, in their own time.

When they are ready to be with others who have



experienced a similar loss, I may suggest a bereavement group, where they can give and receive support from others who know from first-hand experience what it is like to go through such a difficult time. They will be with people who have the courage to want to understand how they have been changed by this loss and what they can do to resume a meaningful life.

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