

How to deal with death and dying

MARLENE EISNER

In the span of two weeks, Natalie Hollinger lost her father and her aunt to cancer. The brother and sister, 78 and 79 years old, respectively, were in palliative care for months – one in Montreal, the other in Vancouver. Neither died suddenly, yet when it happened, it still came as a surprise to Hollinger.

"I guess it's always a shock to hear, even though you're expecting it," said the 39-year-old mother of two. "(Death) is always at some unspecified moment. That moment comes and you're never ready for it, although you think you are."

Hollinger's reaction is not unusual, says Dawn Cruchet, a certified grief educator and counsellor. After 20 years of helping people come to terms with death and dying, she says anticipating a person's death is very different from having it actually happen.

"What I've learned in my grief work is that it is the griever's perception and expectation of the death that's important," Cruchet said. So even if a person has battled a terminal illness for years, death may still come as a shock to family members.

"If someone has cancer, they've fought it for eight years, they've rallied with treatment and then all of a sudden they can't do treatment and they die suddenly, often it's hard for the griever to get a handle on the fact that for eight years they made it and then they are dying," she said.

"If you don't expect your person to die today and you think they will last a month, the perception can be as if they were hit by a car."

Cruchet counsels individuals who are coping with terminal illness or the death of a loved one. She has also developed and coordinates the Growing Through Grief program for Mount Royal Commemorative Services. Free workshops open to the community include general grief-support groups and specialized ones for parents, children and teens.

During literally hundreds of hours of leading groups through coping



MARIE-FRANCE COALLIER, GAZETTE FILES

Dawn Cruchet, a certified grief educator and counsellor, helps people deal with death and dying.

mechanisms and living with death, Cruchet has learned everyone goes through a grieving process – and does so in their own way.

"Your grief journey is as individual as your thumb print," she said.

A common, immediate reaction to death is to become "frozen." Emotions are kept buried so that people can carry on in their daily lives.

But those feelings must be addressed, Cruchet said, although there is no set time, rule or guideline for when a person will become "unfrozen" and get to the next step: dealing with the pain.

"When you start to thaw, months or years later, then those feelings really bubble up and they are very intense and very scary. When you were frozen, you didn't feel deeply.

"One of the biggest things is that the thaw can occur months or even years later and only then do you start to grieve, going through those intense feelings."

Denial, Cruchet said, is one way many people in our society handle death, which can sometimes have dire consequences for those dealing with the loss of a loved one.

"We are a death-denying society, which puts a huge burden on griev-

ers," she said. "I think intuitively people know what they need, but if everyone is saying: 'What's the matter with you; you were fine, now you're a wreck?' you're vulnerable.

"You need support, not people judging or questioning you."

One of the most difficult things for Hollinger was her father's denial that he was going to die, even while he was in palliative care for 2½ months at the Montreal General Hospital.

"He wasn't at all good with it. He did not accept it and was in denial for a really long time. I think it made the whole thing harder for us," Hollinger said.

The death of a loved one is not something one "gets over," Cruchet said. "When someone you love dies, you are changed forever and you have to relearn your world. It's a process and it takes a long time. The best you can do is adjust."

That adjustment – and how quickly it comes – depends on a number of factors, including how various cultures view death. Some, like aboriginals, see dying as a part of a natural cycle of life, so when it happens, coping with the reality of the situation can be easier. Except in certain situations, Cruchet said.

Some do's and don'ts in dealing with those who are grieving

Dawn Cruchet offers the following suggestions on what to do – and what not to do – when faced with someone who is grieving:

Be there to listen without judgment. Grief work takes as long as it takes.

Use the name of the person who has died. Encourage the memories.

Encourage and allow expression of all the feelings of grief. There are no right or wrong feelings; they just are.

It's okay to say things like:

"I'm sorry."

"Do you feel like talking about it?"

"How are you feeling today?"

"It's OK to cry."

"I can't imagine how awful this is for you."

"I wish you strength."

Do something concrete, like making a meal, running an errand, offering to drive, rather than just saying: "Call me if I can help."

Don't avoid your grieving friend because you're uncomfortable. This only adds to the pain.

Don't try to find something positive about the death.

Don't change the subject when the person who has died is mentioned.

Don't avoid mentioning the dead person for fear that you will remind family and friends of their pain. You can't make it worse.

Don't say things like:

"I understand."

"I know how you feel."

"You're lucky; it could have been worse."

"It can't be that bad."

"It was God's will."

"You're so strong."

"Don't take it so hard."

Don't judge feelings by using words like "should" or "ought to." Nobody likes to be "should" upon.

MARLENE EISNER

"If your aged parent was mugged and murdered, that is different than if they are sick. (Similarly,) the death of a child is out of the cycle of nature and complicates the process."

The good news is that life does go

on. Time takes the edge off the pain and, eventually, memories bring smiles instead of tears.

"Grieving is the normal response to loss; it's the flip side to love," Cruchet said.