

# The Art of Grieving

Molly Tomony smiles and nods before asking the sock puppet one last question. "What do you miss most, now that you're gone?"

No, this isn't the evening news, and it isn't Sesame Street. Tomony, a certified art therapist and grief counselor at HospiceCare, is "interviewing" a puppet created by one of the members of her children's grief group. "Making these puppets and talking for them is a great way for the kids to verbalize things that are hard for them to talk about directly," she explained.

The six children in her most recent group have all experienced the death of a parent. "Talking about feelings can be very intimidating," said Tomony. "But speaking through an image is a lot less threatening."

In this case, the kids made sock puppets of the person who died. Then Tomony interviewed the puppets to find out about their parents' favorite things, what they looked like and even how they died. Not surprisingly, the majority of puppets said what they missed most was playing with their kids.

Another session found the children making life-size, stuffed body tracings of themselves. The group discussed what they show on the outside, what they keep inside, and what special things they might keep safely in their pockets.



Sock puppets

"The most important things the kids get from attending a grief group, however, is meeting other kids in the same situation," said Tomony. "They realize that they aren't the only ones to experience this type of loss. Here, they have their feelings normalized by others."

**Kids Hurt Too: Growing Through Grief** is a six-week course designed for children ages 5-12. "Spending time together, doing artwork and role playing allows the kids to become comfortable with each other. It's amazing how quickly they make connections," said Tomony. "We hope that the children develop coping skills to deal with their loss and have their memories accessible for a lifetime."

## Different kinds of grief

Not everyone is comfortable sharing their feelings with strangers. Those who do, however, seem to get comfort from knowing that they are not alone.

"We offer support groups for different age groups because we realize that kids and adults grieve differently," explained Tomony. "Adults may feel like their world has ended, that they have nothing to live for. Kids, on the other hand, want to know that the world will go on. They need that reassurance that not everything has changed."

Children often seek support at different times in their lives. "They re-grieve for their loss when they hit certain milestones

— and feel the absence of their loved one," she said.

"In our teen group, we talk about those situations and share memories. The teens also use art, music and writing to help them express their feelings," said Tomony. "We might use collages and other materials or clay. Listening to music that reminds them of their loss, writing about their experience in a journal, or even pounding out clay may help by allowing them to release their anger in a safe and constructive way."

## Working with survivors

Whether a patient is with HospiceCare for days or months, their families and friends are supported for another 12 months following the death. In some cases, the contact may be in the form of occasional letters or condolence calls from bereavement volunteers. Others may receive calls or one-on-one visits from a bereavement counselor.

"We're here to serve the families in any way we can," explained Rogena Andrus, Bereavement Coordinator in the Janesville Office. "We respond to their individual needs, both before and after the death."

For many families the calls and letters are enough. Others prefer to meet individually with a counselor or join a grief group to share their feeling with others who have experienced a similar loss.

HospiceCare offers several scheduled support groups throughout the year for adults, children and teen-agers. A special holiday grief session is also offered for adults. Additional groups are sometimes added upon request from a specific organization. A business that has had an employee die, or a school whose students experienced the death of a classmate, might arrange grief support within their organization, recognizing the need to support survivors.

"Many people think it's only for family

members, but the Grief Center is actually open to anyone who has experienced a loss," Andrus said. Both Madison and Janesville offices offer services to the entire community. Andrus said that sometimes includes neighbors, friends and co-workers of a HospiceCare patient, but also extends to anyone in the community who is grieving from loss caused by a death.

## Building memories

Sometimes hospice families need a little help to prepare for the death of a loved one. Bereavement counselors are available to work with the families, to help them



"The Time Machine" - This 7-year-old boy whose grandpa died created a time machine from a shoe box and sponges. The invention allowed him to go back in time and re-experience special memories that he had with his grandpa. He would push the sponge buttons and make computer noises while his counselor pulled the paper up from the roll of memories he had drawn including: riding on his tractor, reading a book before bed and fishing.

After the death of his wife, a dad expressed concern about his 6-year-old son who never cried over the loss of his mother. When the boy attended a children's grief group, he found a safe place to express his feelings through art. After asking his counselor how to spell "I am sad," he molded a person with a sad face and those words.



These pictures drawn by a 9-year-old of her parents before and after her dad died. BEFORE: She drew their arms around each other and talked about the love they openly shared with one another. Her dad is wearing what she called "his cowboy outfit": jeans, a denim shirt and his cowboy boots. Around the figures she drew hearts representing the love that they shared with one another. AFTER: She drew her mom in tears with half hearts around her. She explained that her mom only received half of the love and half of the hugs that she used to. She drew her mom in cowboy boots and talked about the many ways in which her mom was now in her dad's shoes—or in this case, cowboy boots.



accept the situation and establish priorities.

"Many families—especially with young children—want to build memories for the survivors," said Molly Tomony. "We might help out by taking photos, encouraging the family to create a video, record stories or shared memories, or make a family tree."

Counselors work with patients, as well. "Parents often want to leave letters for their children to open on special occasions in their life," said Tomony.

## Letting go of grief

According to Andrus, there is no "right" degree of grief, and no "set" amount of time for sorrow. "Each person works through it in their own way," she said. In addition to normalizing a person's grief, a primary goal is helping people return to school, work and life.

Tomony tells a story of one man who found his comfort through the process of helping others. He was an accomplished woodworker who made many things for his wife. When she died, he was very sad and lost interest in his craft.

"I was working with a kids group at the time," she said, "and we decided we needed to have a special place to keep their memories safe. I asked this man to make some boxes for the kids."

The man, of course, made the boxes, glad to have a purpose. And the children were relieved to have such a special place to keep their memories.

