

# Local bereavement support group facilitator talks about her work

*As both a bereaved parent and a bereaved child Marty Tousley has focused her practice on issues of grief, loss and transition for more than 40 years. She joined Hospice of the Valley in Phoenix as a bereavement counselor in 1996, and now serves as moderator for its online Grief Healing Discussion Groups (at www.hovforum.ipbhost.com), and facilitates bimonthly grief support groups in Fountain Hills where she resides.*

**Q:** Tell us a little about the Fountain Hills Bereavement group?

**A:** The group is one of several offered throughout Maricopa County to Hospice of the

Valley families and members of the community. There is no charge, and since it is an open group, no registration is required. The group meets on the second and fourth Wednesday of every month, from 10 to 11:30 a.m., at the Fountain Hills Senior Activity Center (in the Community Center).

**Q:** Is it a large group?

**A:** Group size varies, because it's an open, "drop-in" group. Over the years attendance has ranged from as few as one or two, to as many as ten or twelve people, but the average group size is four to six people.

**Q:** Who makes up the group, mostly women?

**A:** There are times when we've had more women than men, but more often it's about half and half.

**Q:** How did you get into this line of work?

**A:** Early in our marriage my (then very young) husband and I experienced the unexpected death of our three-day old son David, in May of 1967. We were painfully aware that there wasn't much understanding or available support for either one of us back then, and as I look back over the last 40 years on my professional career in psychiatric nursing, I can see that since that

awful experience, I've always been interested in learning more about the normal grief process, and drawn to work with the bereaved. When we moved to Phoenix in 1996, I was privileged to join the staff of Hospice of the Valley as a Bereavement Counselor, where I've been working ever since.

**Q:** What really appeals to you about this as a profession?

**A:** It truly lifts me up and makes my heart sing. I learned very early in life that loss is a part of living, and we all must find a way to deal with it. In



Marty Tousley, is a bereavement counselor for Hospice of the Valley and facilitator for the Fountain Hills bereavement support group.

Please see Q&A page 16

## Memories continued from page 12

Lilly, and why he sits in the cantina on that small, purple couch.

A few weeks after she died, Dick started a diary as a way to talk with Lilly. He jots daily events, "Things she'd like to hear," and even wrote the story of how they met.

The trip to California is one he and Lilly shared for six years. Though he made the journey solo this time, he brought along Lilly's diaries and read her memories of their trips. He is embracing the good memories, cherishing what they shared for 60 years.

Even the happiest memories can bring tears, though, and Dick says others in his situation choose a different path.

"I have friends in my counseling who have taken the pictures away - turned the pictures down - don't want to go into the kitchen. There's a barrier, and it's a continued hardship because someday you're going to have to turn those pictures up."

Dick has Lilly's photo front and center. A large portrait of his smiling wife preparing dumplings sits on the dining room table, next to a vase of fresh flowers.

He also displays the silk pillow that held her remains during her memorial service. Only now, a lei of white flowers rests on it.

## Dealing with grief

Not only is Dick embracing fond memories of his life with Lilly, but he's keeping his mind sharp and hands busy.

Dick is an artist, and since Lilly's death, he has challenged his own skills, learning to work with charcoal, a new medium for him.

Doing so is not a way to avoid his emotions, he says. Instead, this challenge is a place to put his feelings. He calls it a "mental release."

He advises anyone who has lost someone close to find this release.

"I don't care who you are. Your mind is distressed."

He suggests others in the same position be aware of these things.

He advises they make daily checklists, seek someone to talk to and don't isolate themselves. They should look to their own hobbies and interests and find that same mental release.

"It's necessary," he says.

"I have seen men cry because they're alone and they don't know what to do."

## Big changes

A new, palpable fear is the biggest change in his life, Dick says.

During his California trip, Dick visited a small farmer's market one Saturday morning. After a bit, he realized his car keys were missing.

He panicked.

His heart rate and blood pressure shot up.

Eventually he learned a woman had spotted the keys dangling from his trunk and had taken them home. She left a note on his windshield with her phone number.

Dick and the stranger talked, and she then invited him to lunch and to a party (a side effect of love), but Dick couldn't shake the fear.

It remains with him today.

"This is a very real thing. This is a chilling thing, because there isn't anybody there. And if there is someone there, they can't help you anyway. You sweat it out all by yourself," he says.

Since that instance, Dick has created a checklist of six items he must have upon leaving or returning (wallet, keys, glasses, cell phone, checkbook and camera).

When Lilly was alive, if Dick lost his glasses, or accidentally looked for the coffee in the fridge rather than cupboard, she would tease him and they'd share a laugh. Today, these things raise anxiety and blood pressure. There's no more humor in these "senior moments."

A bit of resentment is involved, too. "I get angry at myself because I'm finding out I'm not that smart," says Dick.

## The color purple

Dick misses Lilly. At times, it seems unbearable.

"I start crying, just like that. It's like somebody hits you. You literally feel helpless."

Those bleak moments pass, though.

Concentrating on his art helps. So does his diary.

Embracing the thoughts of happy times can be soothing to his soul, as well.

Yet having fun? Dick enjoys the company of others. Anyone familiar with him can attest to his outward, energetic and youthful zest for life.

It's just not in his nature to sulk.

But this creates another odd problem, he says.

"I don't know when it's over, or if it'll ever be over - the grieving. (Here's) another

sensitive area: are you then guilty of having a good time? I don't know that transition yet."

An idea from a friend strikes him as appropriate, though.

These emotions are colors. And as an artist, Dick knows about mixing colors together,

often creating terrific new shades.

Happiness can be a bright red. Sadness, a deep blue.

Life for Dick Van Den Berg seems a constant mix of the two. It's a nice purple.

Just like the little couch he once shared with Lillian.



Dick Van Den Berg keeps a fresh flower in a vase by a photo of his wife Lillian who died in April.

*Q&A continued from page 15*

my work with the bereaved, I accompany people who are struggling with, working through, and overcoming the most devastating of losses, and every day I learn something new from each of them. I cannot imagine more inspiring, uplifting work than this.

*Q: What would you say to men, who might be apprehensive about coming to regular group meetings?*

*A:* I'd say that grief work is some of the hardest work they will ever have to do, and it shouldn't be done alone. Grief can make us feel very "crazy" and alone, and it helps to be among others who understand what normal grief looks like and feels like, because they're experiencing similar reactions.

Unfortunately, as much as they may want to help us, friends and family members cannot always understand what we're going through and cannot always "be there" for us in the way we may need them to be.

Our need for help may exceed their capacity to help us - and our need to talk about our losses usually lasts far longer than the willingness of friends, family, neighbors and co-workers to listen to us.

*Q: What is the best advice you could give to someone grieving the loss of a spouse?*

*A:* First, understand that grief is not a pathological condition, but rather a normal response to the death of someone dearly loved.

Although certain feelings and reactions are experienced by most people, each person's response is uniquely personal and distinct, and there is no "right" or "wrong" way to do the work of mourning.

There's no set time-table for it, either. Grief is extremely powerful, and it can shake you to the core. It affects you on every level imaginable: physical, emotional, social, economic, spiritual - but understanding the process and knowing what to expect can help you cope.

*Q: What seems to be the main difference, that you've observed, between how men and women deal with grief?*

*A:* I can only speak in general terms here, because each person's grief experience is as unique as his own fingerprint. It's very important to keep in mind that the way we grieve is as individual as we are.

Some men grieve in traditionally "feminine" (or feeling) ways and some women grieve in traditionally "masculine" (or thinking, acting, and doing) ways.

As you might expect (because of the way males and females are socialized in our culture), men tend to be more comfortable expressing their grief individually and privately, whereas women tend to be more open with their feelings and more comfortable with others in expressing strong emotions.

Rather than talking about or crying over the person who died, men tend to put their feelings into action, focusing on goal-directed activities that involve thinking, doing and acting.

Men are more likely to experience and describe their grief in a thinking rather than a feeling sort of way: they prefer to seek accurate information, analyze facts, make informed decisions, and take action to solve problems.

They may appear strong and detached in the face of powerful emotions, and speak of their grief in an intellectual rather than an emotional way.

Unfortunately, this effort to control and not display emotions publicly often puts men at risk of being judged by others as being cold and unfeeling, or as having no feelings at all.

Generally, men are less likely to seek the support of others in expressing their feelings, especially if they don't feel respected or they find certain aspects of grief to be embarrassing.

A man in mourning needs encouragement to share his reactions and emotions, to explore what his loved one's death means to him, and to acknowledge how the loss affects his life.

*Q: What is the main benefit people get from participating in the bereavement group?*

*A:* Oftentimes in our culture it's difficult for a widow or widower to express genuine and at times, intense grief.

If we're uncomfortable with their pain, we may put the widow or widower on some artificial time schedule for the grieving process, pressuring the bereaved partner to "let go" and "move on."

A support group can combat this pressure by encouraging the bereaved to establish their own timetable for grieving. It also helps to lessen the intense social isolation experienced by most bereaved spouses. Because the group is composed of others who've shared a similar loss, members are surrounded by peers who help them feel deeply understood.

Veteran group members also offer hope to newer members, helping them see that others who also know the darkness of loss are not immobilized by it.

It's also important to know that a support group is not the same as a therapy group. Support groups aren't designed to delve into a person's childhood to cure long-standing emotional problems, and they won't change someone's personality or basic values and beliefs.

People sometimes fear that a support group is like going to therapy, something that might be especially scary when they're so vulnerable.

As the name implies, a bereavement support group forms a healing circle that helps members bear up under the heavy burden of loss without giving way.

The group provides a safe, structured place where normal, healthy people bound by the experience of loss can come together on a regular basis to share their stories, get their concerns and feelings validated, learn more about the normal grieving process, express and work through their feelings, and reflect with one another on the meaning of it all.

Members also have an opportunity to grow by giving help as well as receiving it. They support one another as they begin to understand the changes they're facing and begin to fashion a new future for themselves.

*Tousley is a frequent contributor to healthcare journals, newsletters, books and magazines. She has authored a number of books, booklets and online e-mail courses addressing various aspects of loss and grief, including Finding Your Way through Grief: A Guide for the First Year, published by Hospice of the Valley in 2000, and now in its third printing. With a special interest in grief and the human-animal bond, Tousley also facilitates a pet loss support group for bereaved animal lovers at Hospice of the Valley on the first Saturday of every month.*

*Her Grief Healing Web site at [www.griefhealing.com](http://www.griefhealing.com) offers information, comfort and support to anyone who is anticipating or mourning the loss of a loved one, whether that is a person or a cherished companion animal.*

*Tousley received her B.S. in Nursing from the University of Michigan and a M.S. in advanced psychiatric-mental health nursing from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. She is certified by the Association for Death Education and Counseling as a Fellow in Thanatology: Death, Dying and Bereavement, and by the American Nurses Association as a Clinical Specialist in Adult Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing Practice.*

## Stay healthy this influenza season, get vaccinated

About one in five Americans become ill with influenza each year.

The best way to help prevent the spread of this serious virus is through yearly vaccination.

Unfortunately, many are not getting vaccinated, which may put them, their family and their community at risk for this severe respiratory illness.

The National Foundation for Infectious Diseases (NFID) urges anyone who wishes to reduce their risk of influenza to be vaccinated each year. Getting vaccinated helps protect the entire community from influenza, also known as "the flu," which can cause severe symptoms or lead to trips to the doctor, visits to the hospital and sometimes death.

Influenza vaccine is available in many places within the community, such as doctors' offices, the local public health department, clinics at grocery stores or pharmacies and often at work. Prescription antiviral medications also help in preventing and controlling the spread of influenza, and to help treat symptoms.

"Anyone who wishes to protect themselves and others within the community from influenza should be vaccinated, including school-aged children," said William Schaffner, MD, NFID Vice President. "We all need to do our part to help protect our communities from influenza and its complications. Now is the time to plan vaccination for you and your family members."

Influenza vaccine is especially important for anyone 50 years of age and older, children 6 months up to 5 years of age, people with a chronic health condition, such as asthma or diabetes, and pregnant women. Anyone in close contact with these groups or with children younger than 6 months of age should also get an influenza vaccination. This includes parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, health care workers and even babysitters or caregivers.

Influenza season can begin in the fall and last into the spring. Vaccination should continue throughout the season. Since the influenza season usually peaks around February, getting vaccinated in December, January or beyond is beneficial.

Anyone can get the influenza virus. It is easily spread from person to person, mostly by coughing and sneezing.

People, including young children, can spread the virus to others before symptoms appear and for many days after they begin.

People who live with or care for someone at higher risk for influenza should consider an annual influenza vaccination. Influenza vaccine is safe and effective and is available for people 6 months of age and older. The more Americans who get vaccinated, the more families and communities are better protected from the spread of this dangerous disease.

For the 2007-2008 influenza season, the CDC recommends use of two antiviral medications, oseltamivir and zanamivir, for treatment and prevention of influenza. If taken within 12-48 hours of first symptoms, antiviral medications can reduce the severity and duration of influenza. These medications can also help prevent influenza when someone has been exposed to the virus. Antiviral treatments can also be prescribed to anyone with egg allergies who cannot receive influenza vaccine.

*Courtesy of ARAContent*

## Senior Expo Oct. 10

Senior Services will sponsor a Senior Expo on Wednesday, Oct. 10, from 1 p.m. to 3 p.m. at the Fountain Hills Community Center.

The Expo will showcase all the activities provided by Senior Services for the period between October and January.

Attendees will have an opportunity to interact and mingle directly with the various activity groups, to ask questions and learn about the variety of programs that are available.

There will be door prizes and entertainment as well as tables laden with special goodies and refreshing beverages.

A Program Booklet will be available to all who attend.

It contains the schedule of activities, including fitness programs, socialization activities, social services offered and a list of the fabulous trips and excursions scheduled.

It will highlight some special events coming up, such as Flu and Pneumonia Shots scheduled for Tuesday, Oct. 16 and Tuesday, Nov. 13.