Conspiracy of Silence

By Pat Schwiebert, RN

You can’t judge a book by its cover. So it goes that you can’t really tell how someone who is grieving is doing by looking at how they appear in public. People may look good, but they can still be in deep grief.

The conspiracy of silence runs deep in our general public, but it runs just as deep in the grieving community.

This is how we tend to think about our ability to cope:

If you don’t talk about it, you don’t think about it.
If you don’t think about it, you won’t remember it.

It seems that this conspiracy of silence assumes that this life changing event that has just rocked your world will slip from your consciousness and you won’t be able to recall what actually happened if people don’t stir your memory. Sounds good, but silence probably works in just the opposite way. The more we don’t talk about it, or at least acknowledge it, the more it festers in us.

Most people in the throes of grief will admit that they are thinking all the time about their loss. Sometimes it’s all they can focus on and at other times, it’s just riding along in the wings ready to become center stage. Meanwhile the unbereaved are tiptoeing around, acting as if nothing has happened or that nothing is missing so as not to remind the grieving person of their plight—as if they need to be reminded!

The bereaved quickly learn who they can talk with, what they can share and what they cannot share. They learn how to wear a mask of composure so they can fit in, and if they are unable or unwilling they refrain from being in public as much as possible lest they are scolded for appearing sullen, or angry, or forlorn.

Sometimes I wonder, do people really think it is easy to move on with one’s life after experiencing a big loss or receiving bad news? Do we not have the staying power or enough compassion or maybe the bravery to imagine ourselves in that same situation? Must we ask the bereaved to pretend it’s not so bad, so we can go on with our lives? It’s no wonder they are resentful.

(Cont’d on page 2)
So the bereaved come to support groups in search of a few listening ears who can tolerate their story, who won’t tell them to “get a grip,” suck it up “or “get a stiff upper lip”. They come to support groups to share the secrets of grief. One mother needed a safe place to share how sad she was that she never got to throw a birthday party for her first daughter who died 7 years ago, but was going to have a party for her subsequent baby daughter this Saturday. She just needed to be able to say that out loud to others who would just nod in understanding. She knew it was a “little” thing, but she also knew if she shared it, it would not get in the way of Saturday’s event. In another group a woman with stage 4 metastatic cancer talked of how because she “looks okay right now” people don’t ever ask her how she’s doing. She’s afraid they’ll minimize her fears about dying. One of the women spoke of how she couldn’t talk with others about her chemo for fear she might lose her job. And many of the secrets that are shared are about disappointments in family and friends for not having the capacity to just be there as long as it takes.

Life is hard. We don’t need lectures on how to be better. We just need to imagine what it must be like to be in the other person’s shoes. And then imagine what we might want when it’s our turn.

With more than thirty years of experience working with grieving individuals and groups, Pat Schwiebert is proud to be the founder and creative director of Grief Watch. Pat is the author of many books, including Tear Soup, a Recipe for Healing after Loss, We Were Gonna Have a Baby...But Had an Angel Instead, When Hello Means Goodbye, and has created a number of other resources available at GriefWatch.com.

“When you are in pain, you don’t need to be fixed. You don’t need to be labeled as broken, your feelings shoved into codified lists or prescribed stages. You don’t need to be pushed to get better fast.

What you need are those things — those people, those places, those words — that come up underneath you and give you roots. You need those things that nourish you, that help you do the work your heart already knows how to do. The work it is already doing.” ~ Megan Devine, the Huffington Post

What’s Mindfulness Got to Do with Grief?

In our July/August newsletter we wrote about resilience and post-traumatic growth and mentioned how grief can bring on changes in roles, life meaning, and self-identity. We know that often the changes, even if wanted and positive, bring about stress.

Many researchers and practitioners are studying mindfulness as a technique to help grievers approach the stress and changes that come with loss with greater awareness and compassion, and with less judgment. In the introduction to his book Grieving Mindfully: A Compassionate and Spiritual Guide to Coping with Loss, Sameet M. Kumar, PhD, writes that mindfulness can be used to help grievers consciously put the pieces back together, “...while appreciating who you have lost, who you are, and who you want to be.” (NOTE: This book is available from the Hospice library.)

Practicing mindfulness simply means focusing attention on your thoughts, feelings, surroundings, and what’s going on in your body right now. The practice also involves acceptance of your thoughts and feelings without judging them — for instance, without believing there’s a right or wrong way to grieve. Another way to think about mindfulness is that it’s about paying attention to what’s going on in the present moment rather than going back over the past or worrying about the future.
As you face life without your loved one, changes will occur with or without the practice of mindfulness. Those in the helping professions agree that finding ways to “turn off the switch” of stress and worry is important to self-care and healing. Meditation and planned relaxation are known to be helpful ways to calm your mind. Practicing mindfulness won’t take away your pain, but it can help bring you back to the present moment.

One local resource offered by the Bloomington Center for Mindfulness is *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction*, taught by clinical psychologist Linda F. Brown, PhD. This 8-week course can help you learn new ways of meeting the stress in your life with meditation, gentle yoga movements, and other mindfulness practices and also provide you with recordings and materials for practicing at home. Dates for the next class are Tuesdays, September 13 through November 1 at 6:30 pm, and the cost of the program is on a sliding-scale basis. More information is available at bloomingtoncenterformindfulness.com or by contacting Linda F. Brown, PhD at lfbrown@indiana.edu or 812-369-4257.

If learning about mindfulness on your own is more your style, the book *Mindfulness & Grief* by Heather Stang is a good tool. This book also is structured as an 8-week program and day-long retreat with over 35 meditation, yoga, journaling and arts exercises. Stang holds a Master’s degree in Death, Dying and Bereavement and is a member of the Association of Death Education and Counseling besides being a mindfulness meditation and yoga instructor. More information and meditations are available at her website mindfulnessandgrief.com.

**Supporting a Grieving Child**

> “There really are places in the heart you don’t even know exist until you love a child.” ~ Anne Lamott

Whether parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, godparent, friend, or teacher supporting a child who is grieving can be a heart-wrenching challenge. The death affecting a child you care about undoubtedly affects you as well, so you will be doing your own grieving as you support the grieving young person. At a time when you might feel overwhelmed with your own grief, the child you care about may need you the most. Here are some ideas that might help you provide a nurturing environment despite your own sadness and pain.

- **Adopt the advice of the airlines** – Take care of yourself first; this shows that self-care is important and okay and will help give you the energy to support the grieving child.

- **Balance love and structure** – Grieving children need unconditional love and continued structure and routines at the same time. It provides a sense of security if important adults in their lives keep routines and are consistent and patient with appropriate discipline.

- **Communicate openly and honestly** – Grieving children need to be given age-appropriate facts about what happened to their loved one. Secrets and half-truths can add to confusion and mistrust.

- **Stay connected** – Children need the involvement and attention of adults who care about them. When you spend time with a grieving child, you send the message that you are still there. Make time to do simple things and have fun.
■ Truly listen – Take time to be a supportive listener to the grieving child in your life. Rather than trying to fix something that can’t be fixed, just listening to the child’s concerns, fears and feelings can be healing.

■ Teach positive coping – Help the grieving child in your life find healthy ways to deal with the pain of grief. This might be through exercise, breaks from chores or homework, healthy outlets for anger, more time with friends, or grief groups.

■ Allow for the expression of emotions – Since children’s grief is often expressed through play and behaviors, they need free time for things like sports, music, writing, or other creative activities. Children’s grief doesn’t look like the grief of adults, but crying is universal and not hiding your tears shows that crying is a sign of love.

■ Create a community – It’s impossible to support a grieving child alone if your own grief is substantial, and especially if you are a grieving parent. Ask for support from family and friends or, if necessary, find other support in your community. (NOTE: Healing Hearts group to start in September. See information on page 6.)

*Based on an article by C. Caryn Kendo, MSW*

**Hospice Seminar: Understanding Grief**

Date: Wednesday, September 21

Time: 4:30 – 6 pm

Place: IU Health Hospice office, Medical Arts Building, 619 W. First Street, Bloomington

Cost: Free. Call 812.353.9818 or email Wendy at wvanderzee@iuhealth.org to reserve your spot. “Am I going crazy?” “Are my reactions normal?” Grief due to the death of a loved one can affect us in many ways—physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. Join IU Health Hospice staff to learn about grief, tell your story, and gain ideas for coping.

*By Caleb Wilde*
Bereavement Support Meetings and Groups

Since many people feel alone in their grief, it can be reassuring to talk with others experiencing a similar loss. The following is a list of groups facilitated or led by members of the Hospice Bereavement Team. All groups are free and open to anyone in the community.

Monthly Meetings

Monthly meetings for bereaved Parents and Spouses are held in the private conference room at Noodles & Company 2560 E. 3rd Street, The restaurant is located on the south side of Eastland Plaza next to Dollar Tree. No registration is necessary to attend.

- Parents who have lost children of any age meet the 2nd Wednesdays of the month. Dates for the next three months are as follows: September 14, October 12 and November 9. Time is 5:30 – 7 pm. Call Cindy for more information.
- The Spouse Loss monthly gathering will be held at dinner time (5:30 - 7 pm) on the third Tuesday of each month through the fall. Dates are as follows: September 20, October 18 and November 15. Please, call Pat with questions.

“With the help of these and other commonplace objects – with the help of the two big elm trees that shaded the house from the heat of the sun, and the trumpet vine by the back door, and the comfortable wicker porch furniture and the porch swing that contributed its creak...creak...to the sounds of the summer night – I got from one day to the next.” ~ William Maxwell

Longer Groups

Pre-registration is required for all longer groups, so please call 812.353.9818 for more information and to register for groups. To receive the most benefit from these groups it is important to commit to the entire six weeks.

- **STARTING SOON: Healing Hearts Group** for children (ages 6-16) offers the opportunity to process the loss of any special person. Over the course of six weeks, trained Hospice staff and volunteers will assist the participants (who range from 6 - 16) in processing their loss through talking, stories, games, crafts, and videos. Group will be held Tuesdays, September 13 – October 18. There is no fee and snacks are provided each week. Please, call us if interested!

- **STARTING SOON: Spouse Loss Support** will meet for 6 Thursdays beginning September 15 through October 20 from 4:30 – 6 pm. The death of a long-time partner or spouse stirs strong emotions about one’s identity and future. A common statement is “It’s like losing a part of yourself!” This group offers the opportunity to talk about your experience and learn how others are managing the major changes that accompany this loss.

- At **Meadowood Retirement Community** a four week Grief Support group will be offered by IUH Hospice Bereavement on Thursdays October 6 through October 27 from 1 – 2:30 pm. The group is also open to greater community members who want to explore ways to cope with loss due to the death of spouse, child, sibling or other loved one. Registration forms are available from Mary Boutain at Meadowood or by calling Wendy at Hospice.
Other Area Support Groups

- IU Health Bloomington offers **Resolve Through Sharing**, a support group for those who have had a miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant loss. The group meets the second Monday of every month from 7:30-9 pm at Bloomington Hospital Chapel. No registration is required and refreshments are provided. Call or email Samantha with questions or for more information at 812.353.5482 or ssweatman@iuhealth.org.

- **GriefShare** is a Christian-based grief group offered by Sherwood Oaks Christian Church in Bloomington. Registration is required, so call 812.334.0206 if interested. Bloomington North Central Church of Christ also offers the 13 week GriefShare program in the fall and spring. Call 812.332.2248 if interested.

- In **Greene County** Solsberry Christian Church is conducting the GriefShare program on Thursdays until November 17 at 6 – 7:30 p.m. Call 812-825-5222. Information about GriefShare is also available at griefshare.org.

- In **Owen County** the Center for Women’s Ministries offers support; 751 Franklin St., Spencer, IN. Please call 812.829.0477 for more information.

- In **Morgan County** Eastview Christian church conducts GriefShare. Register online at eastviewchristianchurch.org or call 765.342.4483.

- In **Lawrence County** **Hope for Healing** support group for adults is offered throughout the year at IU Health Bedford Hospital. Call Sula at 812.275.1200 for information and dates.

- **Survivors of Suicide** meets monthly in Bloomington on the 4th Sunday at the Monroe County Public Library from 12:15 - 2 pm and is facilitated by Ron Masters, LCSW. No registration is required, but calling Ron to confirm attendance and room number is helpful (812.335.8555).

- **NEW: Suicide Bereavement Support Group for Teens** and their families affected by an attempted or completed suicide, traumatic event, or violent death. Sponsored by the Monroe County Suicide Prevention coalition, the no-cost, self-help group is led by Pete Link, LCSW and is held on the third Wednesday of each month from 6 – 7 pm at the Monroe County Public Library. For more information, contact Pete Link at pete.link@uhsinc.com.
Blessing in the Chaos

To all that is chaotic in you, let there come silence.

Let there be a calming of the clamoring, a stilling of the voices that have laid their claim on you, that have made their home in you, that go with you even to the holy places but will not let you rest, will not let you hear your life with wholeness or feel the grace that fashioned you.

Let what distracts you cease. Let what divides you cease. Let there come an end to what diminishes and demeans, and let depart all that keeps you in its cage.

Let there be an opening into the quiet that lies beneath the chaos, where you find the peace you did not think possible and see what shimmers within the storm.

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Remember: Hospice Bereavement Staff are available by phone or email!
812.353.9818 or 1.800.206.5200

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Along the Way
An IU Health Hospice Bloomington newsletter to help in bereavement.

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"Believe that life is worth living and your belief will help create the fact." - William James