

Haven Herald



Letter from the Executive Director

With spring approaching, I am aware that yet another change is coming. Any change can be difficult, but the loss of a loved one changes our sense of time and place in the world. Each person's grief is unique, but at the same time, grief is a great equalizer. We are not the same, and depending on our circumstances before a loss, we are often dealing with overwhelming situations. Finding balance can be difficult, but it is even more challenging for people who are disenfranchised. The word disenfranchised can mean many different things in our society, but it almost always refers to a circumstance that is different or not the norm. People who are disabled, are physically or mentally ill, or who have alternate lifestyles or are living in situations that isolate them from the traditional family roles are part of this group. The daily challenges of life are overwhelming enough, but the added stress of grief can make the struggle more difficult.

Paul Tschudi, Program Director and Associate Professor for End-of-Life Care at George Washington University, addressed the issues of disenfranchised grievers at an in-service at Haven last October. He emphasized that finding support can be difficult and acknowledged that a more complicated lifestyle further complicates the grief process. Finding a place to receive support and feel safe is important.

All people are welcome to come to Haven after the loss of a loved one. We recognize that each person's journey is unique. Haven is an inclusive organization that welcomes those who are willing to talk about their loss and trust the process. No matter what your circumstances are, with time and caring support, your life will get better.

Jill Bellacicco

Alone in Your Grief

by Joni Greene

Whether you are young or an adult when your parents die, you feel as if you have a big hole in your heart. The persons who have known you all your life are gone. It is time to turn to your siblings for comfort. When you are an only child, the grief you feel becomes complicated.

The relationship between an only child and his or her parents is particularly strong. All your life, their focus has been on you. They know your every move, which can be a good or a bad thing. You never had to compete or share time with them. Now, no one is left with whom you can share your immediate family history. The “do you remember” game is over, and the stories of your early years have ended! You confront life alone, and you face yourself as an individual in a new way. You no longer belong to the family of your past.

When my mother died, I was a young adult. Coping with her death was difficult. The person who helped

me the most was a friend who was also an only child and grieving. Her parents had been killed in an automobile accident a few years before. We found comfort in each other. Seventeen years later, when my father died, I remember walking away from the cemetery thinking that my parents were together and they had left me. I was angry with them. They had brothers and sisters; why didn't I? I felt alone with no one to share my grief and no one to share the stories of my childhood.

My mother once told me that I would have been jealous if I had had a brother or sister because I would have had to share my toys. She neglected to tell me how important it would have been to have siblings. When my husband and his siblings get together, they talk about the past; they play the “do you remember” game. I am reminded that I have no one to play the game with.

I have moved through the grief of losing my parents, but being alone and without siblings is still a struggle.

What Worked for Me

by Linda Torezan

It is still a vivid memory. I was sitting in an airport, waiting for a connecting flight, when a well-known actor walked by. I wanted to call my daughter, Tara, to tell her. But there could be no more phone calls, no visits, no sharing stories, laughs, worries, or dreams. I was traveling home after burying her. We had lost her to suicide, to the depression she had struggled against until she lost hope. I recall the isolation I felt sitting in that crowded airport, as if watching the world from some separate dimension. No one in that “real” world knew or understood what had happened.

When I returned home and to work, friends and colleagues were kind and patient, but I felt completely disconnected and raw. Grief was exhausting and consuming. I had lost my bearing. My daughter's life, and mine, seemed defined by her death. You don't “get over” a loss to suicide, but now, almost 14 years later, there is a scar where the gaping wound had been. It has been a long journey.

The most helpful thing for me was attending a suicide loss support group that met twice a month. We shared our stories, revealed our feelings without fear of judgment, and felt understood and connected. I found solace there and attended for over two years. We supported one another through the birthdays, holidays and anniversaries that are so difficult after a loss. I also read many books about suicide. One that touched me deeply was *No Time to Say Goodbye* by Carla Fine. Most importantly, those of us who loved Tara continued to speak her name. Eventually we stopped focusing on the way she died. Now we are able to talk about happy times with her, remembering the way she lived and the loving, funny person she was—the daughter, niece, cousin and friend we will always miss.



Disenfranchised Grief

by Mary Smith



When a loved one dies, we suffer intense sadness. Our loss may feel so painful that we find it difficult to manage the pain or to contain it well enough to carry on with our normal lives. In fact, our lives feel anything but normal. We may feel adrift. What helps when one is adrift? Sharing our loss helps. When we share our grief, we feel connected and less alone. And when someone hears us express our pain, we feel understood and cared for. Our feelings of loss and sadness may be less painful if they are heard and acknowledged. But those who are disenfranchised may find it difficult to have their loss heard and acknowledged.

What is disenfranchised grief? It is grief from a loss that is not sanctioned by the larger community. Examples of those who may be disenfranchised are ex-spouses, adopted children, lovers, gay men and women, women who have had a miscarriage, people whose loved one has completed suicide, and those whose pets have died. Millions of people suffer these losses every day, but our society

often does not seem to recognize these losses as important. These losses are profound, but they may be ignored or even belittled by many people in our society.

When an ex-spouse dies, how many people reach out to the remaining ex-spouse? Do we acknowledge the loss? Do we send cards or flowers? A divorce may have taken place, but ex-spouses still have feelings about each other. A death may stir up those feelings and trigger a reflection on the years spent in the marriage, both the good and the bad. Regrets and guilt may become intense and tender memories may stir sadness. And yet as difficult as this loss may be for someone, we don't offer the support that is needed. We think, "they were divorced; the marriage is over and so are the feelings, at least the tender ones."

Gay men and women may truly feel unacknowledged when they lose a partner. Many people believe that gay relationships are invalid and would be hard-pressed to sanction the grief surrounding the death of a gay partner or child. A friend's mother refused to believe that her son was gay, even when he was dying of AIDS. Her refusal to accept her son as gay was devastating to him, his partner and his siblings. This mother created a rift in her family that has not been healed.

Those who have suffered a loss of someone by suicide may find that the larger community sometimes ignores such a death. Many people do not want to talk about suicide, period. Perhaps these people find the subject too frightening or too depressing to bring it up, even to express condolences. But whatever their reasons, they may be silent when it comes to a death by suicide.

The loss of a baby through miscarriage may be devastating to a family, but many may respond by saying, "You can have another baby." In other words, why grieve?

Many people feel inconsolable over the death of a pet, but often do not get much support. A friend confided to me that very few recognized the death of her dog as anything other than an inconvenience for her. To her, however, his death was monumental for many reasons, including the fact that the dog was her loyal anchor when her husband died.

It's helpful to remember that many people feel disenfranchised in their grief. They need our support and acknowledgment of their losses.



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Spring Schedule

Six-week General Bereavement Support Group
Tuesday, April 10 - May 15, 2012
7:30 - 9:00 p.m.

Six-week Suicide Loss Support Group
Wednesday, April 11 - May 16, 2012
7:30 - 9:00 p.m.

Six-week Widow/Widower Support Group
Saturday, April 14 - May 19, 2012
AM Group 11:00 a.m. - 12:30 p.m.
PM Group 2:00 p.m. - 3:30 p.m.

Call or email Haven to register for the groups.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

Haven of Northern Virginia
4606 Ravensworth Road
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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003

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