

Reaching OUT for Help

Erasing the stigma
of professional
counseling

A mark of disgrace; a stain or reproach on one's reputation. That is how Webster's dictionary defines the word "stigma."

And there are few things in life that bear a stigma like that associated with professional counseling. Many people feel that seeking professional counseling is a sign of weakness, is shameful or somehow discredits them as a person.

This stigma is often the barrier that prevents people from getting the help they desperately need. And for those who are experiencing the tragic and sudden death of a loved one, allowing the stigma to take hold can be particularly troublesome because emotional support is crucial to healing.



A Sign of Strength

Grief is grueling work that requires an outlay of both physical and emotional energy. While the expression of loss, anger and sadness is a necessary part of grief work, it can be difficult to do without support of some kind.

“Professional counselors play an important role in facilitating healthy grieving and observing the signs of complicated grief that can lead to major depression,” says Art Solomon, Ph.D., a psychologist who specializes in grief counseling.

“For some, there is still a social stigma that seeking counseling is a sign of weakness or that you must be going crazy. But the exact opposite is true,” Dr. Solomon continues. “It takes a great deal of courage to take the first step, and making the choice to heal is empowering.”

“I immediately put my pride aside and ignored any stigmas regarding counseling because I wanted to help protect my wife, Kathy, from gut-wrenching pain,” recalls Steve McKaskey of the time following the death of his eldest son, Matthew, who was killed in a drunk driving crash. “I attended a grief support group on my own—Kathy wasn’t ready to take that step.”

The death of Matthew in February 2002 was difficult on Kathy. “We were out of town when I called Matthew

to say good night. My last words to him were, ‘I love you, honey.’ Four hours later he was killed by a drunk driver,” Kathy tearfully recalls.

Over time, Kathy tried group counseling. “I decided that I didn’t want everyone to worry about me, and that was a motivating factor in giving counseling a try,” she says. “It was a valuable decision, although the first session was overwhelming. Sitting in a circle hearing one tragedy after another, I felt that my grief had been minimized. But the value of knowing that you are not alone is powerful.”

“I think the key is to give it a try, at least once,” Steve suggests. “It is helpful to hear others and learn coping tips. After a period of healing, I felt like we were able to pass on some coping tips.”

Normalizing Grief

A therapeutic environment, whether a counselor’s office or support group meeting, can provide a safe place of reassurance and connectedness. It also can help “normalize” grief.

Just ask Rayan Wilson, a bereaved mother from Hawaii. After her son, Jeff Carvalho, was killed less than a year ago by an alleged drunk driver, Rayan sought professional counseling.

“I do most of the talking during my sessions, but my counselor has a way of bringing out feelings that I couldn’t say aloud before,” Rayan says appreciatively. “She validates that I am a normal grieving mom.”

Kathy has had a similar experience in her group session.

“I remember during a support group session I was appalled when a grieving mother was laughing as she was sharing a funny story about her child,” Kathy recalls. “I thought ‘How dare she laugh, that is so disrespectful.’ After some time, I understood that laughter is normal and part of the healing process. I can laugh now too.”

“In support groups, as a person sits and listens to the experiences of other group members, the realization occurs that these experiences are not unusual or to be feared, and that he or she is not going crazy,” Dr. Solomon says. “Rather, these are normal grief reactions to the experience of a profound loss.”

Understanding happens when a person starts to open up. And opening up begins with talking. By telling your personal story, the process of ordering and organizing thoughts and feelings about the impact of the death evolves.

“I also attend a support group for bereaved parents,” Rayan says. “It’s amazing that we all have the same sad eyes and you can almost see the holes in our hearts, but our words validate each other.”

Dr. Solomon says, “Part of de-stigmatizing counseling support is the message that it is OK to cry, share, laugh and vent. It is important for the griever

to give words to grief and sorrow in a setting that is comfortable and accepting.”

“Sometimes, when I share my feelings, it really helps me not to second-guess myself,” Steve admits. “All of the ‘whys,’ ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’ can really beat you down.”

Taking the First Steps

In the first few weeks after a loved one’s death, many people are numb and preoccupied by the necessary practical tasks and family matters. Because of that, they are not ready to talk about or work through the various aspects of their grief. The optimal time to start counseling, whether one-on-one or group, is one to three months after the death has occurred.

“When Jeff died, half of me died with him. The other half of me is severely bruised,” Rayan says with sorrow in her voice. “A couple of months after his death, I started counseling services to explore if I could heal my bruised side.”

Steps to find the right counselor are similar to those used to find a good medical doctor. The more effort you put into finding a counselor, the more likely you will have a positive experience. And there are several steps that can help you find the right one:

- Ask a trusted friend, acquaintance or doctor for a recommendation.
- Have a phone conversation with potential counselors before making an appointment.
- Get the right information about a potential counselor, such as his or her credentials, areas of strength, approach to counseling, assessment of progress, and if his or her license has ever been revoked or suspended.
- Make a choice and take your counselor for a “test drive” by evaluating the first session.
- Continue the process.
- Don’t be afraid to try a different counselor if you feel it’s necessary.

“Prior to my first counseling session, I talked with my counselor on the phone,” Rayan explains. “She was so comforting and accepting that I immediately connected with her. I wasn’t nervous at all when I walked into her office for my first visit.”

“Grief counseling can be a valuable resource and a person has nothing to lose by giving it a try,” Dr. Solomon says. “It is fully voluntary on your part and you can discontinue at any point. One size does not fit all, but if you try it a little at a time, there is a strong possibility that you’ll feel more comfortable.”

Planting Seeds of Hope

In addition to helping a person through his or her grief, a counselor should offer hope that someday the pain will lessen and that life will again have some meaning. However, it is important that the counselor not offer unrealistic hopes or offer hope in a way that

denies or invalidates the current intense experience of grief.

“Attending a support group for more than a year did inspire hope for us,” Steve says. “It was amazing to witness our own healing, as well as that of others in the group. Through sharing with each other, we reassure each other that life will feel better someday.”

Planting a seed of hope can be a lifeline. And because every person grieves in his or her own time and way, time can be helpful. But, only if the person grieving is working through the loss.

Grief is like the healing of a wound. If a wound is cleaned and properly dressed, time and treatment will heal it. If the wound is not appropriately cleaned and tended to, no amount of time will help.

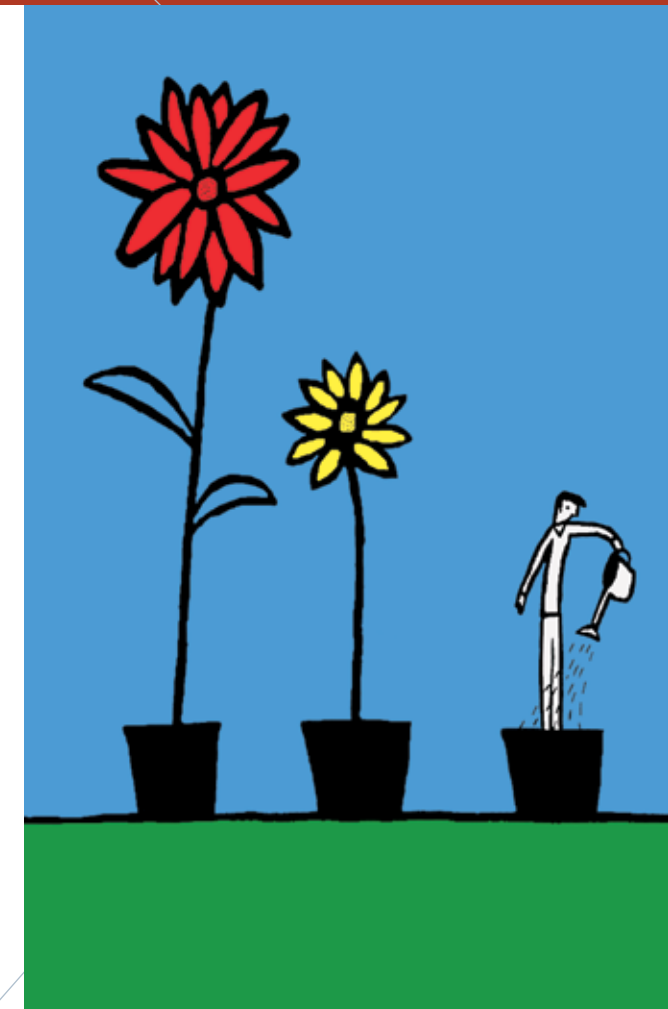
“If victims access support services, they will learn lessons such as healing from grief doesn’t mean forgetting,” Dr. Solomon says.

“There are always difficult and overwhelming days to live through, but now I feel that I am able to remember Matthew with less pain and more joy,” Kathy says. “Steve and I lean on each other and we have wonderful family support, but reaching out for counseling supportive services has been exceedingly beneficial.”

Shakespeare wrote, “Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o’er-fraught heart and bids it break.”

“I think I would have died of a broken heart if I had not tried counseling,” Rayan says. “There are stigmas, but they must be ignored. If you don’t do it for yourself, do it for your loved ones.”

For those who are still unsure about professional counseling, Kathy says, “Give it a try, you won’t be alone.”



Benefits of Professional Counseling

One on One

- Offers time devoted specifically to you
- Is a confidential, safe setting
- Offers the ability to resolve the immediate problem at hand
- Helps increase awareness and understanding of feelings, where they come from and how they influence your thoughts and actions
- Provides a greater sense of confidence in your ability to cope with future problems

Support Group

- Offers a better understanding of the grief process
- Provides a safe place in which to express emotions
- Develops additional support systems
- Helps cope with loneliness and brings a sense of belonging
- Improves self-esteem
- Allows for sharing of coping methods