

Loss as a part of life

Grief therapists help people through difficult times

By Linda Falkenstein

Many east-siders have passed the place thousands of times: the stately lakeside home on Lake Monona that is the San Damiano Capuchin Franciscan Friary. It was originally the house on the Frank Allis farmstead, namesake to the nearby elementary school.

The building is now a retreat for the Franciscan fathers. Thanks to them, it's also home to the Center for Life and Loss Integration, a group practice of six grief counselors that's non-denominational (in fact, non-faith-based). It's been operating there, without fanfare, without a sign, for the last 18 years.

The large living room, with its welcoming hearth, is used for support-group meetings, while smaller rooms host individual therapists' offices. "It's not so much like an office, it's more of a home," says Center co-founder Judith Koepl. "That can be helpful when someone is experiencing profound loss."

The big rear porch, which overlooks the lawn and Lake Monona, is set up for art therapy sessions for children. And the grounds are open to those coming to the center as well, including a rustic wood swing and a path down to the water.

"It's a beautiful place to do work," notes former Center counselor Jim Kramlinger, "and then go for a walk. It's so soothing."

Grieving is an important part of life, one that is often overlooked in American society. In the U.S., the common response to death and dying is still that "people would rather not talk about it," Koepl explains. Those grieving lost mates, friends or relatives find themselves feeling rushed along, as if they should have gotten over the loss already.

"People really want them to feel better, yet may be very subtly giving the impression that the person is not going fast enough, or is doing it 'wrong,'" Koepl says. Those around the bereaved may feel they should avoid mentioning the deceased's name, when doing so offers an opportunity to talk about the person who's passed away. "It's important to [those surviving] to honor that memory," Koepl notes. "Telling stories is important."

The expectation to "hurry up and get over it" is often internalized. "People think they're not doing well because they find themselves sad, crying or lonely," says Koepl, but "it's all part of the process. It takes a long time."

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Bonnie Milgrim, another therapist at the center, specializes in working with women in transition, adolescents, young adults and families. "Writers like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Steven Levine helped take death and dying out of the closet, but we're still a death-denying culture," says Milgrim. "Death isn't so hidden in other cultures." Coming to terms with death as a part of life is "work," she notes, but "it opens you up to something deeper in the heart and soul."

The Center offers counseling, bereavement support groups, retreats, loss workshops and other training. It also matches people with other local grief resources, from local churches, hospitals and HospiceCare. In addition to Koepl and Milgrim, staff therapists are Ginny Rickert, Linda Colletti, Deb Percival and Molly Tomony, a specialist in art therapy and children and family grief.

Upcoming workshops at the Center include "Writing Through Loss" and "Compassion Fatigue," aimed at professional caregivers. A support group for widows under age 55 also meets there.

Judith Koepl got into the field of grief counseling the way many do: from feeling at sea when it came time to deal with grieving in her own life. When she was 27, her own parents died within five days of each other. "It was very traumatic and before there was hospice." In order to

assuage her sense of loss, Koepl was "muddling along, doing some reading and volunteering with seniors." Eventually she went back to school at UW-Madison and earned a master's in social work with a specialization in grief and loss. She went on to develop HospiceCare's bereavement program before helping to start the Center.

"I'd recommend a support group to anyone," Koepl says. "It's often helpful to talk over loss and explore the process with other people. You can feel isolated; in a group you see you're not alone." Although some people don't want to share their personal problems with strangers, Koepl suggests that they be willing "to take a chance. Sometimes it's helpful to talk to people who share a similar experience with you."

Some activities that may help someone working through a loss aren't necessarily obvious and might even seem to contradict



Judith Koepl, one of six center therapists: 'Some people grieve through action.'

each other. They can include both talking to the person who died and declaring a day off from grief; exercising and listening to relaxation tapes. "Some people grieve through action, like planting a garden," says Koepl. Maybe the garden is a memorial, maybe not. "It's your own grief. There are no agendas."

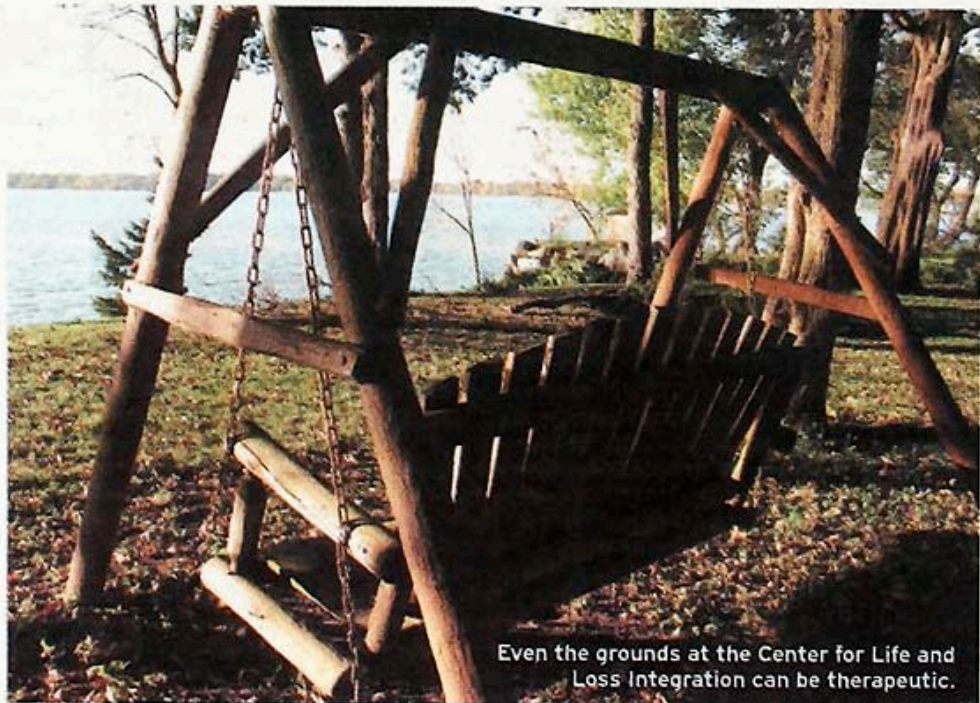
She advises those who have experienced a sudden, unexpected, significant loss, perhaps due to violence (for instance, a suicide or a car accident), to consider one-on-one therapy sessions. But at the same time "it's the individual's choice. He or she has to be open to it. You can encourage people, but you can't force them."

Koepl cites the work of Gunderson Funeral Home in Madison and Ellestad Camacho Funeral Home in Mt. Horeb in being forward-looking in putting clients in touch with local grief resources. And Gunderson underwrites some of the center's group therapy sessions. Mike Smits, of Gunderson, says that seeing clients through the grieving process is "another piece to what we do."

Grief can accompany life events other than death. The loss of a job, a divorce, the loss of a pet — any kind of change or transition can signal a need to grieve. "You've invested part of yourself in that thing, whether it's a relationship, a home or a job, and when that's taken away from you, you also lose that part of yourself that you invested in it," says Koepl.

She's interested in new ways of working through grief that go beyond the now-familiar Kübler-Ross five stages of grief. "How do we reconstruct the meaning of our life?" Koepl asks. "Who am I now? What do I want to do?"

"We work with people at their lowest points, but they will come through. There's potential for incredible growth." ♦



Even the grounds at the Center for Life and Loss Integration can be therapeutic.

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