

In the Face of Grief

By Rev. Craig Roshaven, Main Line Unitarian Church, Devon, PA
SGM Quarterly, Spring 2010, Facilitator's Toolbox

“The heart has its reasons of which the reason knows not.” - Blaise Pascal

This observation is especially true in the face of loss. Grieving has its own logic and timetable. Loss is part of life. It's inevitable that expressions of grief will challenge us in our small group ministries. How can a small group best support its members in the face of loss?

I believe what's most important is to be as fully present and emotionally available as possible. But, in my experience, that's far easier said than done. When someone has been very angry or very sad, sometimes I have just wanted to escape. I have often been tempted to minimize or even deny their experience. Even more frequently, I have been tempted to “fix” their problem by offering unasked for advice.

Some years ago, my brother was the victim of a violent crime and spent weeks on the brink of death in an ICU. I was at his side with his family. During that time of trial, I was comforted most by those friends who would patiently listen to me talk about what was going on. I didn't need advice or prayers or solutions. I just needed someone who cared enough to simply listen.

My primary method of pastoral care is to simply listen. I used to wonder if that was enough, if there wasn't something else I should be doing, e.g. offering a prayer, an insight, or a practice. But I've come to believe that most often the impetus for such “offerings” is more about reducing my discomfort than that of the person I'm supposedly comforting. That is why it is so important that our small groups honor the covenant of no cross-talk or unsolicited advice. This discipline, this spiritual practice, allows us to be present to one another in a way that is both rare and precious.

P.S. Most people, though devastated, eventually find their way through the emotional wilderness of grief. However, there are those who don't recover. After suffering a significant loss, some will experience intense distress and depression leading to self-destructive behaviors. If you fear that someone in your group is at risk, contact your minister or someone else who is in a position to assess their level of risk and/or provide an appropriate referral or intervention.

Rev. Craig C. Roshaven is the associate minister of Main Line Unitarian Church and supports its extensive

-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Quarterly, Spring 2010