

Thank you for using our printer friendly story page.

[Return to story](#)

2>[Coping With Loss](#)

Grief Is Always Complicated, But Young People Face Special Challenges

Wisconsin State Journal :: DAYBREAK :: D1

Friday, December 29, 2006

MAGGIE ROSSITER PETERMAN For the State Journal

When a parent dies, children grieve for a lifetime.

The loss of a parent is not something a child gets over in a hurry, said Molly Tomony, an art therapist and social worker at HospiceCare Inc., Madison.

"Kids and teens tend to grieve more intermittently," she said. "They need breaks from their grief. They may cry, then an hour later ask to go to a movie with their friends.

"They need permission to have fun and not feel guilty."

Recognizing that the death of a teen's parent, brother, sister or grandparent may cause anger, moodiness or risk-taking behavior, Hospice officials developed a seven-week series -- "Teens Together" -- for young people grieving the loss of a loved one.

HospiceCare is a nonprofit organization that provides a collection of resources to patients and families facing end-of-life issues.

As teens grow up, they may find significant life events, such as high school proms, graduations and their weddings, more emotional because they no longer have a parent to share in the excitement, Tomony said.

"There are reminders and triggers that last a lifetime," she said. "If a child had a really close or a conflictual relationship with a parent, it could complicate their grief."

Mother dies

Few students at Madison's Edgewood High School are familiar with Robert Yocum's story.

Classmates have chatted with Yocum, now 18, in classrooms, at play practice and during drills for the golf team.

Yet most of them don't know that Yocum's mother died from breast cancer five years ago.

So when acquaintances make typical teenage comments like "Why don't you just ask your mom?" -- Yocum thinks to himself, "Yea, right."

Yocum was in third grade in 1997 when doctors diagnosed a

cancerous cyst. His mother died when he was in seventh grade.

For four years, he cared for her every day after school -- making her tea, cleaning up the kitchen, throwing in a load of laundry and walking the family's two dogs.

"I pretty much did everything," he said. "I was home a lot and closer to my mom than my dad and (older) brother.

"She was so grateful when I did stuff for her. It felt good."

Although Yocum met with a counselor in Dallas, a small northeastern Pennsylvania community of about 2,500 residents where his family lived, he discussed the emotional turmoil between he and his father more than the sadness he wrestled with during his mother's illness.

He was not familiar with HospiceCare services.

"She had chemotherapy every Wednesday," he recalled. "She would come home very tired. I always felt awful.

"I was definitely in denial a month before she died and a month after ... I felt empty. I felt lonely a lot."

He spent dozens of hours in solitude playing video games.

"The most important people in my life were my friends and my friends' parents," he recalled.

"I always looked at other families with jealousy. I wanted a warm family."

Yocum cherishes fond memories of his younger years when his mother coached his soccer team, taught swimming lessons at the YMCA, helped his brother with homework projects and family card games of Pitch.

"I was on her team, and I'd mess up a lot," he said. "The three of us would laugh at her because she acted so goofy."

About 15 months ago, Yocum moved to Madison to live with his mother's sister, her husband and their five children.

"The hardest part was leaving all my friends," he said. "I didn't realize the huge transition ...

"I'm starting to feel more normal now. I definitely made the right decision by coming here. I have stuff to look forward to more."

Memories bring comfort

Jenny Nankivil, 14, an eighth-grader at Oregon Middle School, and Margaret Francois, 14, who attends ninth grade at Belleville High School, recently met during a HospiceCare workshop series in Madison.

Reluctant to attend at first, the teens said they found the Monday evening sessions inspiring.

"It was very good, even my mood is better, especially on Mondays," said Jenny, whose father died in May from suicide.

Through art projects, puppets, photographs and discussions about funerals and life changes, Tomony helps youths share their feelings and learn how to find comfort in memories.

"Most sessions are active," said Tomony, a mother of three children, ages 10, 8 and 5. "Moving around is a pretty comfortable way for kids to process things.

"If we help kids learn ways to cope with grief at an early age, it will help them build coping skills that are accessible to them for a lifetime."

Margaret said she was closer to her grandfather than many children are with their fathers. When he died in July from lung cancer, Margaret said she tried to mask her sadness.

"It was like losing my dad," she said. "I took a big downward fall. I shut everyone out. The first step is to admit you need help."

Although attending the first Hospice workshop was the most difficult, Margaret said she is happy she pushed herself.

"There were so many different options to help you explain what you are going through," she said. "I liked how it wasn't so structured."

Little things count

License plates with numbers that add up to 15 or 29, or any athletic jersey with those digits remind Patrick Meyer, 15, of his older brother's football uniforms.

Aaron Meyer died May 10, 2005, after he lost control of his truck and crashed while on his way to help a friend. It was four days after his 18th birthday and six weeks before he was to graduate from Madison's Horizon High School.

"Those were Aaron's favorite numbers," said Patrick, a sophomore at DeForest Area High School. "He used them for everything -- even his passwords."

Aaron was a fan of the Beatles, Jack Johnson, the Grateful Dead, Bob Marley and O.A.R.

"That's just to name a few," Patrick said. "The list goes for days.

"When a song of his comes on, I smile to myself."

Patrick learned techniques for coping with grief while attending Hospice workshops and after reading "Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief" by Dennis Klass.

"The book says the person doesn't have to die. You can do things to keep their spirit with you," Patrick said.

Patrick, his parents, Cathy and Tom Meyer, family members and friends have formed the Aaron J. Meyer Foundation.

Through the foundation, the family plans to purchase a house near UW-Madison campus to operate as a drug- and alcohol-free environment for college students in substance-abuse recovery.

Connections Counseling in Madison is assisting in selecting residents for "Aaron's House," said Tom Meyer, 47, a real estate broker.

"The hardest thing to lose as a child is a parent," Tom Meyer said. "The hardest thing to lose as a parent is a child."

Patrick Meyer is a member of the board of directors for Aaron's House.

"To help people who have problems is so Aaron," Patrick said. "He'd be stoked to know we were working to give people another chance."

More youths participate

A \$25,000 grant from the Evjue Foundation and a pair of \$15,000 grants from the United Way of Dane County have funded six-week HospiceCare grief counseling sessions to elementary, middle and high school students.

Children from five Madison elementary schools participated in the program in 2005. Students from one elementary, one middle and one high school attended the Hospice fall series. Teens from two middle schools and another high school plan to participate in January, Tomony said.

"When we went into the schools, we learned there was a whole different population of kids we weren't serving," she said. "Many kids in the schools have experienced sudden death from accidents, suicide and homicide and didn't realize they could access hospice services."

Further information is available at www.hospicecareinc.com.

\ Contact Maggie Rossiter Peterman through daybreak@madison.com.

Return to story

madison.com is operated by Capital Newspapers, publishers of the Wisconsin State Journal, The Capital Times, Agri-View and Apartment Showcase. All contents Copyright ©, Capital Newspapers. All rights reserved.