

# MANAGING GRIEF DURING THE HOLIDAYS

By Michelle Gabrielle Centamore

The holiday season often brings with it a rush of excitement: Joyous celebrations, family togetherness and seemingly endless meals that often conclude with a peaceful time of rest and relaxation among family and friends. But for individuals who have suffered the loss of a loved one, this time of year can be challenging, filling one with intense emotions and feelings of loneliness or sadness. This holiday season, professionals at various support organizations want those in need to be aware that there is support available to help them manage their grief.

"The holidays are a time when many people may feel especially alone," said Sonia Wagner, executive director of Response of Suffolk County, which offers crisis intervention counseling and referrals to community services to residents. "Many families don't have the Hallmark card experience and are struggling, and if the family has had a recent loss prior to the holiday, Thanksgiving and New Year's, for example, can feel like a numbing blur."

While many people can easily get caught up during the holidays, Wagner said, it is important to "be good to oneself," and find ways to relax, de-stress and cope with one's feelings. She suggested such activities as taking a walk or bicycling, exercising as a "great stress reliever," and engaging oneself with supportive friends or family members. Picking up a hobby that involves others, such as joining a hiking club or choir, also may be helpful. Her organization makes referrals to specific support groups based on an individual's needs, Wagner said, guiding parents who have lost a child to Compassionate Friends or an individual who has lost a pet to Bide-A-Wee, for example.

"It is also important to be respectful of one's feelings," Wagner said, "that is, knowing it is okay to participate in solo activities that could create a brief distraction, such as journal writ-

ing or watching a comedic television program."

But if an individual requires further assistance to help them deal with their grief, Wagner said, there is more support available.

"Crisis counseling is helpful because sometimes sadness, grief and anxiety come up at inconvenient hours, for example 2 a.m. Christmas Day — a time when a therapist probably is not available." Wagner noted the organization's hotline, 751-7500, which callers can phone 24 hours a day, seven days per week, and speak with a counselor.

Individuals also can seek support through Response's "Hear2Help," an online program located on their website, [www.responsehotline.org](http://www.responsehotline.org), in which individuals can privately chat via the Internet with a counselor, Monday through Friday, from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m.

"It is open to anyone, but we are finding that teens and young adults are especially drawn to this service, probably because the Internet is a place they call home more often than older adults do," stated Wagner.

New to Response is "Conexion," a Spanish hotline service available to teens and families, Monday through Friday, from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. at 751-7423.

"So commonly when people call our hotline they feel completely alone with their problems and they are very surprised and relieved typically to learn that we receive many calls from people having similar difficulty, for example, people feeling that they can't function, that their grief is so intense that taking a shower is hard to imagine," Wagner said. "The first thing I would say to someone going through this is, 'You are not alone and there really is support out there, and much of that support is free.'"

And for families who are sharing a loss, Wagner said, it is important to honor and respect each other's individual feelings regarding that loss. "A teenage boy might not talk that much and sometimes it is okay to just recog-

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nize that," she said. "We all want to hurry up through grief sometimes because it is uncomfortable for us, but it is also okay to cry and grieve." Wagner added that, regardless of age or gender, "we are all vulnerable and may grieve at our own pace."

For children and young adults, managing grief may require various approaches, according to Janene Gentile, executive director of the North Shore Youth Council in Rocky Point, a non-profit agency that has offered comprehensive youth and family services to the North Shore community for more than 25 years. The organization has professionals on staff to provide support to young individuals and occasionally the elderly, who face personal challenges in their lives. Individuals who need support may call the NSYC at 744-0207.

For young people dealing with grief, Gentile said, "You have to create a really safe and non-judgmental environment." Depending upon the age of the child, "you really have to be very flexible in the approach." Gentile said therapists sometimes invite children to incorporate "expressive arts" in their treatment, including art and play therapy or journal writing. "Sometimes, young people are not able to verbalize their feelings," she explained, and participating in "short-term solution-focused therapy," such as creating a collage to represent one's life or feelings, may help a child to understand and experience the loss.

"When a young person is grieving, they question many things in their lives," said Gentile, "including their very existence. They may wonder, for example, why the God they believed in allowed pain in their family." That is why, Gentile said, "I really believe that part of the experience is to explore spirituality ... to start to explore the essence of who they are by listening to their inner self." Gentile added, "Bereavement is not an intellectual process; rather, it is emotional, and all individuals suffering from a loss need

to find some way to cope ... We help guide them."

It was a lack of guidance to help him through his loss that led Richard Scheinberg, founder of the Sunrise Counseling Center in Bay Shore, to a career devoted to helping others in emotional or mental distress, using his own experience to empathize with his patients. Scheinberg was only 19 years old when his 26-year-old sister was caught in the middle of gun-fire while helping a friend in need. Scheinberg, who was attending college Upstate at the time, was instructed by a family member to come home "because your mother needs you." When he arrived, he was hit with the devastating news.

"It is something that took me awhile to come to terms with," said Scheinberg, who noted that, as a young man, he was encouraged to maintain a very strong and silent presence. As a result, he said, "I was very introspective. I was not someone who would lean on people. I did not know what to do. My whole family was a big mess." Although the tragedy occurred in 1972, Scheinberg said he can still recall scenes of his mother in a constant state of hysterics and his father alone and numb. "And I was in shock," he said. "The whole experience was surreal."

It was not until years later that Scheinberg was able to truly grieve. "At the time of my sister's death, someone said to me, 'Gee, you must be very bitter.' But I really did not want to be bitter. I just wanted to make sense and peace with it," Scheinberg said, adding that his sister had a way of reacting to anger with more compassion.

And during the holiday season, especially, Scheinberg said, in spite of feelings of loss and despair, "there is also a greater opportunity to use that time to enrich one's life by gaining a better appreciation for the people that are living, letting them know how much you care."

For more information on the Sunrise Counseling Center, call 666-1615 or visit [www.sunrisecounselingcenter.com](http://www.sunrisecounselingcenter.com).