
Pat McNees, author of Dying: A Book of Comfort, on Grieving In Dealing With Mental Illness and Positive Methods of Handling It

NAMI General Education Meeting

December 13, 2007

At first there may be a feeling of shock – “Why me”? There is a numbness, dazed disbelief, a feeling you are just “going through the motions”, a sense that part of you is functioning and part of you is not. There is also a possibility of laziness, fatigue, and a sense of depletion. Pat McNees, an editor and author of several books – often about medical research, says those are stages of grieving.

Pat McNees talk at the NAMI education meeting was about understanding and healing when faced with grief over the loss of a loved one.

Pat spoke about ambiguous and disenfranchised grief as it related to mental illness. People with mental illness experience grief as loss for the person they were in the past. Parental grief can be huge when a child is diagnosed with mental illness.

Other types of ambiguous grief include the loss of a partner in a gay or lesbian relationship, loss of limb or function, the end of your career, and a missing member of your family.

The problem with ambiguous grief is that one is suffering a loss but it’s not visible to other people. The result is that one does not receive social support.

Pat McNees drew on the work of Katherine Gilbertson who wrote about “disenfranchised grief”. According to Katherine Gilbertson in disenfranchised grief, the relationship is not socially recognized or is hidden from other others. That is often the case with mental illness.

When one is dealing with a family member who has mental illness, there is plenty to deal with: medications, treatment, and safety. Pat McNees stressed that if one is loaded with unresolved grief, there is a feeling of exhaustion or illness. It is imperative that we recognize mental illness as a loss and do the necessary grief work!

The process of grieving allows the person to arrive at a stage of acceptance and of renewed hope. It is important to let yourself be conscious of what you’re feeling. Tune into the feeling. Be conscious of the process, and let it happen. Pat said that “the only way out is through.”

Another way to handle grief in a positive manner is to keep a journal. One can also tape record their life history to pass on to future generations.

Pat McNees noted that men and women often experience grief differently. For example, women will be more emotional and there may be tears whereas men want action. That would include activities like building a monument or constructing a bed for someone who is ill.

It is beneficial to have someone listen and understand your situation. The bereaved individuals need to have their grief legitimized by others. Support groups at NAMI have that type of understanding. NAMI support groups promote healing from grief through their guidelines of: respect for others needs, understanding the emotional stages family members go through and what support is necessary at each period, aiming for better coping skills, rejecting stigma, strength in sharing experiences, embracing humor as healthy, expecting a better future in a realistic way, and to embrace hope and a vision of what is possible.

A listing of support group times and locations are located in the monthly NAMI newsletter or by calling the NAMI office at 301-949-5852 between the hours of 10 a.m. through 2 p.m. Monday through Friday.

One should focus less on the illness and more on the positive attributes of the mentally ill family member. One needs to re-frame their life and start over.

Notes taken by Rochelle Banta

December 13, 2007