

The presence and process of grief.

Grief is a natural response to a loss of any kind. Most commonly, people associate grief with the death of a loved one. But we can experience grief at many other times in our lives, and for different kinds of loss, both great and small. The collapse of a relationship; the loss of a job; our children leaving the nest; the loss of a pet; all of these can bring us to a state of grief.

There are so many exhausting challenges in caring for a loved one living with dementia, and one of these is the reoccurrence of grief. In my experience, for the family caregiver grief comes again and again. It is the nature of dementia that the person's personality may change again and again, almost in steps or stages. With each change, while you can still recognize the physical person, they have become different. As you lose the personality you knew, each discernable change becomes a reason to grieve.

Sadly, this is not a disease that lets us hold off and prepare ourselves for that one big period of grief that begins at the time of our loved one's death. As caregivers for individuals living with dementia, we must mentally and emotionally prepare ourselves for a difficult path of repeated grief.

I will tell you from my experience, and from the many conversations I have had with experts in this field, it is very dangerous to try to ignore grief or to try to handle it alone. Most of us simply don't have the energy, specialized knowledge, or life experience to go it alone, and we can permanently damage our ability to function and survive if we try.

Grief is nothing to be ashamed of, and it is definitely not a unique or solitary experience. We all go through it, and the path forward will move more quickly if we have help, or if we work through it with others who are grieving too. I attended group and solo grief counseling for many months following the death of my husband Albert.

At that time, I could not guess that my future would involve trying to help other caregivers for loved ones living with dementia. I was exhausted, I had been cheated by this awful disease, and I was simply done with it! But today it has become my passion and profession, and I believe this would not have been possible without my being guided through my period of grief by an experienced professional who helped me realize that my trial was a valuable lesson, not just a bitter loss.

Fortunately, in Citrus County there are resources ready and willing to help us through our grief. Most readers will be aware that over the last year we have seen a restructuring of hospice services in our county, and I, for one, was afraid we might lose those bereavement services that had been so valuable to me.

Fortunately, I was wrong. Not only do we still have two hospice organizations to serve us, but from this restructuring emerged an autonomous charitable organization to provide bereavement support along with other valuable services. Its name is Friends of Citrus and the Nature Coast. This is a long name, so let me just call it "Friends" for the remainder of this column.

Its bereavement services include grief support workshops, telephone support, educational materials for parents and teachers, Herry's Kids programs with Camp Good Hope and Teen Encounter (Grief Support Camps), and L.I.F.T. social support for widows and widowers. And many of these services are open to anyone who has experienced loss of any kind, and they have professionals prepared to help you work through it.

Part of working through grief is trying to maintain our sociability, and Friends has programs to help with this as well. For example, they show free classic and recent-release movies at several locations throughout the county.

Friends also offers the Five Wishes Program which helps one conduct the end-of-life planning that we often don't think about until we are faced with a crisis. They also offer Alzheimer's 1 and Alzheimer's 2 classes with state-approved certification that provide valuable knowledge for the caregiver or anyone who would like a better understanding of the disease.

Friends works from two locations here in Citrus: Homosassa and Lecanto. Their High Springs location helps serve a 12-county area throughout Central Florida. To help raise the funds they need to provide services, they have two local Herry's thrift and gift shops with some great bargains.

As I said above, Friends has emerged as an autonomous organization due to the restructuring of hospice services in Citrus County, but they are actually the same organization that got me through my crisis with the same services and some of the same expert personnel.

There is absolutely no reason to grieve alone. I urge you to take advantage of the support available to you. For information about services or to donate,

call 352-249-1470 or 352-454-0844 or visit www.friendsofcitrus.org or Friends of Citrus on Facebook.

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