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Good grief: Stay positive for the holidays

By Daniel Gowan

Relationships can be tough this time of year. I call it the Bermuda Triangle of holidays.

For many, this will be the first set of holidays without a loved one. Broken relationships can take many forms. Most people in Collin County have experienced divorce in their families. Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah and New Year's Day take on radically different meanings when it is the first time through without a spouse. In my practice, I often hear the same words of loss, anger and depression as those used when we experience a loss through death, as well.

I used to think grief occurred like stair steps: You moved through one stage and "stepped up" to the next one. My experience is different than this, however. What I have observed with mine and other's grief is that it is more circular (think Slinky).

One day we have a level of acceptance about the loss, and the next we try to deny it. Over time, however, we seem to move through all of the stages while returning to each periodically. With time, the rawness begins to dissipate. Sometimes slowly -- and I am not sure that it ever completely goes away.

Sometimes we are given the opportunity to deal with these feelings, these "stages," at different levels. Like the layers of the onion, we can usually go deeper.

When I facilitate divorce recovery groups (or other loss-related

groups), we try to deal with the feelings in a productive manner. My experience is that the groups generally go either into the solution or into the problem (sometimes in spite of where I try to take them).

A constant look backward rarely allows us to move into today, let alone tomorrow. It is clear to me that grief involves the sadness of dealing with lost hope for the present and the future. This can be true hopelessness. With productive, solution-oriented work (and time), the hope for the future and the hope for the present can be more hopeful, but it must be a new and different hope. Grief is about reconciling these two perspectives between lost and new hopes.

Traditions often tie us to these hopes of the past. This is why it is so difficult to experience great times of tradition like Thanksgiving or Christmas. The holiday is just not the same if we all aren't there. But a new hopefulness would encourage us to develop a new tradition that helps us move on, while still enjoying an existing tradition in a new way.

At the counseling center where I practice, we used to use divorce recovery groups to allow people to vent and focus on their feelings of hopelessness. We have changed. Now, we offer to walk forward with people. People continue to grow with forward-looking behavior. We even changed the title and now call the group "Ready to Heal."

It sounds simplistic, but I have observed that the people who are happy in life are the ones who focus on what they have, while the unhappy folks are the ones who constantly focus on what

they don't have. To that end, a productive move through grief and loss may include some of the latter, but a solution-oriented approach will continue to encourage us toward a focus on what we do (and will) have.

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For more information on "Ready To Heal" go to www.standrewumc.org or call 214-291-8077.



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