

## **Everyone grieves in their own way**

*By Ellen Waldman*

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By the time you reach a certain age, you will have experienced the death of someone important in your life.

When this happens — whether for the first time or after many times — most people go through a period of grieving. This feeling of sadness is well researched, and a variety of supports are recommended.

Many years ago, about six months after my mother died, I found myself with a great deal of heartache. With my background in psychology, and with the help of friends and family, I figured I could handle my grief. I came to realize this was too much to manage without professional support. Fortunately, I discovered an organization in Medford called WinterSpring (<https://winterspring.org>; 541-552-0620).

They offered group support for those experiencing the loss of a loved one and the grief that accompanies this. Attending this group changed everything for me. I was truly surprised by the range of people there, led by a very compassionate nurse.

One man said he had never grieved the death of his wife, which happened 20 years prior. The group leader made everyone feel welcome by saying something I've never forgotten, "There are no grief police."

She meant that everyone grieves in their own way, and it doesn't matter how long it takes until you grieve, or for how long.

I contacted Hogan Sherrow, executive director at WinterSpring, and asked him about grief and the services they offer. Here is some of his valuable information:

WinterSpring has multiple offerings for older adults in its peer-to-peer support groups, including general bereavement, cumulative loss, spouse and partner loss, suicide loss, bereaved parents, men and grief, and holiday relief.

Grief is a tricky thing and it doesn't run on a predictable schedule. While there are recognized stages of grief that most people go through, there is no way to anticipate the timing of those stages, or whether everyone will experience all of them. If someone is not group ready, they can direct them to other services, including licensed counselors and therapists.

There are a lot of misconceptions about grief. First, a lot of people think that grief happens in a pattern and on some sort of schedule, which is predictable in time and space and between individuals. Second, we tend to think that the only people who are grieving, or have the right to, are those who have suffered the death of a loved one. Grief doesn't have criteria that have to be met before you experience it. Third, our culture tends to ignore or minimize grief, treating it like it's a temporary condition that should be eradicated as quickly as possible. Grief is normal and the result of the love we can feel for one another — it is part of the human experience.

WinterSpring doesn't work one-on-one with any of its clients. Instead it will refer people to a counselor or therapist. Over its 30-year history, many people have benefited greatly from finding a community of their peers who have had similar experiences. It allows for a level of empathy and connection that is not part of the individual therapy experience.

Most of WinterSpring's adult groups run from six to eight weeks, with two facilitators, and are located in Medford, Ashland or Grants Pass. One of the reasons they are so thorough in their screening is that groups get very real, and participants have to be ready for the emotional challenge. The end result for most people is a transformative experience that many have said saved their lives.

We don't like to talk about grief, and we don't want to deal with it, which is unfortunate. We need to understand that humans everywhere experience grief, and that we never "get over it." We always carry grief over losses in our lives with us, but we can learn to live with it, and to embrace a new way of living again. WinterSpring works every day to help people learn how to deal with their grief and learn to live again.

I've recently experienced sadness over the death of a very kind, caring man, my former physician and friend. Knowing my choices of support include the services at WinterSpring means I don't need to go this alone. Now you know that this is available for you, too.