



For a good listen, talk to the Age Wise Age Well group

By Ellen Waldman

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When Maria lost her husband, she attended a support group through WinterSpring, a center for grief and loss (<http://winterspring.org>; 541-552-0620 — their spouse and partner loss support group begins on April 2). Maria found that it was increasingly difficult for her to feel at ease talking with friends about her new unmarried situation in life. She was introduced to the Age Wise Age Well program and began meeting with a peer counselor in her own home.

After a couple of months, she felt a lot more settled and was less anxious about being single again. In my work, I like to say that everybody needs a good listening to. Age Wise Age Well is an organization that provides just that. I heard from Nan Gunderson, a volunteer with the program, and here's what she told me in more detail.

Q: What is the program designed to do for older people?

A: This senior peer counseling program is designed to give emotional support to people over age 55 who experience difficulties such as loss of a loved one, or loss of physical health, as well as other life transitions related to aging. Residents in Jackson County are eligible for this program at no cost.

Q: Who generally makes use of this service, and how do people find you?

A: Through a 30-hour training in counseling and weekly supervision, lay people who are elders can be trained to help seniors specifically by listening objectively, caring about them and their issues and, if requested, can help in problem solving. One client told a peer counselor that she appreciated having someone hear her, whether she wanted to vent or to figure out a relationship problem. She said it was good that a peer counselor had her back, while she negotiated some communication problems on her own.

Q: How does this program provide services and what can people expect?

A: Peer counselors visit in the living place of the client, usually one hour per week for the length of time that the client finds counseling useful, sometimes several weeks or several months. People find out about Age Wise Age Well by word of mouth, from home medical professionals, through county resources and by family members. The prospective client, or the referral source, calls the office at 541-646-3402. The assessment/intake meeting is set up within a week of the referral, at the person's residence, and then a peer counselor calls to make an appointment. A successful client has said that they feel empowered to make clear decisions. They also feel they better understand themselves, their situation and their resources both personally and community-wide.

Q: How are people chosen for and trained to be a peer counselor?

A: People can apply to volunteer, if interested. There is a peer counseling training each spring. This year the training is for nine weekday mornings on Tuesday to Thursday from April 14 to 30. The training will be at the Age Wise Age Well homesite: One West Main St. Suite 303, in Medford. To register or to

inquire about becoming a peer counselor, please call 541-646-3402. Age Wise/Well is sponsored by Community Volunteer Network, a PRS Organization.

Q: What is your personal involvement with this program?

A: I have been a peer counselor for three years. The program has served Jackson County seniors for more than 15 years. There is a need in the northern part of Jackson County for more peer counselors — or for counselors willing to serve in Rogue River or Eagle Point. Our leadership team includes Becky Martin, Bruce Reinstedt, Brent Poulton, Cydne Collins and Nan Gunderson.

Something I've noticed is that too often people try to "buck up" and present a good face to their friends and family. This only works so well and for so long. In a case where someone is the caregiver for an elderly person with degrees of physical and/or cognitive impairments, it can really take its toll. Another area that might cause some unease is any sort of transition or move. They actually have a name for this: relocation stress syndrome. Moving is not easy for anyone and is especially tough for the elderly. But whatever causes some stress, anxiety, fear, depression or other states of mind, it's often the case that we can benefit from a trained ear and kind heart. Listening and providing support is available through Age Wise Age Well. It's one of the golden gems in our community. Whether as a volunteer or a client, we can find some real solace here.