

For people who are grieving, holiday season can be tough

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For many Americans, this is the most miserable week of the year, right down there with Thanksgiving.

They are people who have lost loved ones, and they are spending the holidays swallowed by grief.

"People are having fun. Life hasn't stopped as it has for you," said John C. Tormey, a grief counselor and associate professor of psychology and thanatology (the study of death) at Bristol Community College in Fall River. "You think, 'I'm angry that you have happiness.'" He was speaking at the J.J. Duffy Funeral Home in Cumberland to a group of people who had lost loved ones.

"Grief is more severe at this time of year for many reasons," said Leslie A. Feil, a clinical psychologist who practices in Barrington and is a clinical assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University's Alpert Medical School. "As the days get shorter and the weather is colder, and there is less light, we have a natural, biological tendency to feel more tired ... and to feel down. That's natural.

"Add that to the fact that this is the holiday season, which now extends from well before Thanksgiving to well after New Year's Day. There's a lot of stress, a lot of expectations connected with the holidays.

"What we often see with grief and sadness is a sense of failure to meet expectations. That's especially true for women. There is an expectation that around the holidays we're all going to perform like Martha Stewart, making cookies, gifts, decorations, and we take it upon ourselves for putting the holidays together.

"So, if someone is already going through a stressful time, or a grieving period ... it may come with a sense of failure."

Or with anger, guilt or regret, other potential components of grief, said Tormey. "Grief is so painful by its nature that you don't have to add to it," he said.

For a child, losing a parent is unimaginable. To help children who have lost a parent, it's important to be creative in establishing new traditions, Feil said.

For parents, losing a child is devastating. "The holidays are particularly tough on parents who have lost children," Feil said. "There is so much focus on giving to kids, and making kids' celebrations so special. When you lose a child, you think back to when the child was alive and your hopes and wishes for the child at this time of year. That can be especially tough.

"And our culture puts a lot of pressure on people to get over their grief," she said. "There's a sense that someone should be over grieving in a year or some other arbitrary time frame, but grief is very individual."

Tormey recalled the Connecticut physician whose wife and two daughters were murdered. When the killer was convicted and sentenced to death, a reporter asked whether the sentence would bring "closure."

When a child dies, Tormey said, "closure" never comes. "Grief is the price we pay for loving," he said. "And all love ends in grief."

Grief itself has a price, Feil said. It robs the bereaved of sleep, nutrition and immunity against disease. It is critical for the bereaved to sleep and eat well, she said.

Grief is normal, Feil and Tormey agree. And grief has no time limits. "Grieving goes on for a lifetime in some form," the psychologist said. "It's normal to feel sad." When grief begins to affect a person's health, however, it may be time to seek support from a professional or others who have been through the experience.

Feil is president of the Rhode Island Psychological Association, which can refer grieving people to a psychologist.

There are also support groups and agencies that offer help, including the Veterans Administration, Home and Hospice Care of Rhode Island. "If you don't have money to seek individual treatment, there are other ways," Feil said.

Tormey said, "The best way to get out of your pain is to help someone else ... to normalize grief."

Psychologist referrals in Rhode Island are available online at ripsych.org or by calling (401) 736-2900.

A webcast of Tormey's talk to grieving families about the holiday season is available at the J.J. Duffy Funeral Home website, www.jjduffyfuneralhome.com

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