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NF98-382



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Dealing With Change: Emotional Overload

By Herbert G. Lingren, Extension Family Scientist

A 7-year-old boy and his teenage brother watch men haul away all the farm machinery and then all the livestock. The foreclosure of the family's farm is announced in the paper. The teenager dreads facing his friends at school and can't handle the tension and the silences at home. The husband says nothing to his wife but drives around by himself and thinks about suicide. All his hard work has led to nothing, and he feels that he is a failure. His wife bites her lip, says nothing and waits in fear.

This family's experience of crisis has turned their world upside down. Everything that seemed to make life meaningful has disappeared. When a farmer sees his/her crops destroyed by drought or by floods, or when illness or death or divorce occurs, the sense of loss is often devastating. Whether the loss is of a farm, a home, a job, or a loved one, everyone in the family is affected.

What do you do with all your feelings of rage, hurt, or sorrow? What do you do when you feel like you are drowning in a sea of anger and despair?

The first thing to do, and the most important, can also be the hardest: ***Talk about your feelings.*** When times are toughest, people blame themselves and try to protect those around them from knowing how they feel. Unfortunately, this "protection" keeps everyone in the family feeling alone and emotionally overwhelmed.

If you are a parent, you may try to hide your feelings from your children, believing that you are making it easier for them. Actually, the greatest gift you can give your children is a ***model of how to deal with loss.*** It sends them a message about what to expect from life and how to cope with loss.

Studies of teenage suicides show that the way teenagers respond to overwhelming loss depends greatly on how they have seen their parents respond, and whether their parents are willing to listen to them discuss their feelings. What is true for teenagers is true for every member of the family. Sharing feelings is the first step to handling emotional overload.

A crisis disorganizes people. The stressed person feels disoriented, and even common tasks seem almost

impossible. ***Lending a helping hand*** provides the opportunity to ask overstressed persons how they are feeling and shows that you care.

During a crisis, when doing the simplest thing seems hard, people often feel that they are worthless-not good for anything anymore. A friend or loved one can make them realize they are not only loved and capable but needed as well.

It is also important to recognize when a person going through a crisis may need ***professional help***. If you think that a person needs more expert help than you can provide or you are concerned about his/her safety, call your county's mental health agency or Cooperative Extension educator.

If you suspect that a friend or a loved one is suicidal, do not leave him/her alone! Stay with the person until help arrives. Ask the person how he/she feels. It is a myth that asking a person about suicide will give him/her the idea. On the contrary, asking gives the person a chance to say what he/she is feeling.

If the person has attempted suicide before, or has a definite plan for how to do it, the danger is great. Even if the person says he/she is fine and doesn't need help, call the community mental health agency in your county and ask what to do next. Be sure the suicidal person is not left alone while you seek help.

The grieving process

Sometimes it helps to deal with crisis and loss if we know that what we are experiencing is the normal grieving process. The grieving process has several stages, all of which are necessary as we try to deal with the changes brought about by loss.

The process begins with ***shock and a denial*** of the loss. Some people go through a stage called "bargaining" when they try to make a "deal" which denies the finality of their loss. Bargaining is different from real problem-solving because the person tries to pretend that it never happened rather than dealing with the changes brought about by the loss.

Frequently, one moves from denial to ***anger*** about the loss. At this point a lot of blame is placed. When change has turned our world upside down, we feel powerless. One way to try to regain a sense of control is to ***blame*** someone – even ourselves – for what has happened.

Blaming occurs also at the stage of grief called ***depression***. Feeling angry and powerless, we turn our rage onto ourselves. As a result, we feel depressed and become so emotionally drained that we have little energy to do even the things that we used to enjoy.

During the stage of ***resignation*** we finally recognize that change has taken place, but we realize this without hope or a sense of meaning. In order to move beyond resignation to acceptance, we need to talk with others. As we reach out we discover that there were things in our lives before our loss which we still can enjoy. Friends help us recall what was meaningful in the past and to link that with our life in the present. This helps us look to the future with a sense of hope.

Different family members arrive at these stages at different times. When you are feeling angry about a crisis it is difficult to live with someone who denies the existence of a problem. In the same way, if you are trying to work on accepting a loss, you may be impatient with a spouse who has become depressed and withdrawn. Actually, he/she is working through the same process you are, just in a different way.

One way families are helped to deal with a crisis together is through ***humor***. Even if everyone is at a

different stage of grieving and if everyone feels "burned out" and exhausted, laughter can unite a family. When emotional overload becomes overwhelming, laughter brings healing.

When Norman Cousins, author of *Anatomy of an Illness*, learned he had a terminal illness, he rented movies that made him laugh. He watched them from his bed and laughed his way back to health. As he later wrote, laughter and healing go hand in hand.

Coping with loss

Let's ask again these questions: What do you do when you experience a loss? What do you do with all the feelings it brings? The first step is to **talk** with a friend or loved one who is a good listener. A friend can help you realize that what you are feeling now is part of a process.

Grieving a loss is a necessary transition to a new life. In the meantime, because all the stages in grieving take a huge emotional and physical toll, eating regular meals and getting enough sleep and exercise each day are important. Friends can help with the gift of a meal, a helping hand, and most of all, by listening.

Listening to a friend offers him/her a chance to pull together thoughts and feelings at a time when everything seems scattered. Listening and laughter are the great healers. Sometimes, though, emotional overload is so great that professional help is needed. If you think that your friend is feeling so overwhelmed that his/her health is in danger, call the community mental health center in your community and ask for assistance.

Whether you or a loved one or your entire family are experiencing a loss, it can be a time of coming together or of drifting apart. The **key** to weathering a crisis together is **dialogue**. In sharing your feelings with your loved ones, you are opening the door for them to express theirs. This open door may be the greatest gift you ever give.

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