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Inside/Outside

by Nan Zastrow, Wausau, Wisconsin

wings1@charter.net

“What happened to you?” The question appears to be an easy one, but it comes hard when you don’t know if you should ask it. I met at least a dozen people between the scene of the my bizarre fall and my destination for care. My forehead, eye, chin and nose took a brutal scrapping from the fine dirt and sand on the blacktop road.

A gardener outside the facility saw me fall. I looked up at him as I picked myself up from the ground. He made no attempt to come to my aid or even ask if I was okay. He put his head down and returned to his work. I was embarrassed by my klutziness. I limped away with a swollen knee, badly bruised shoulder, and aching rib. I dabbed at the blood coming down my face. I just wanted to get to the restroom, clean up the wound and stay out of sight. The last thing I wanted was someone asking me questions about what happened, because I truly hoped no one else noticed my fall. I hurt all over, and the visible wounds on the outside triggered a stinging pain on the inside that further triggered the tears.

About a week after my “accident” and into my recovery, I realized this experience was a great analogy for grief. When someone loved dies, we are wounded on the inside as well as on the outside. The wounds may not be visible, but the scars run deep and the healing is not always so swift. Many of our “friends” can’t see our pain; and of those who can, some choose to ignore it.

People in general are very hesitant to “discover” what it is that hurts, or what caused the hurt. More people avoided asking me what happened than did those who were brave enough to ask, “What happened to you?” I realized the behavior was based on two realities.

1. If they asked, they might find out something they didn’t want to know or involuntarily become a part of.
2. If they asked, they needed to be ready to listen to my story.

I quickly concluded that our human behavior is programmed to avoid these situations, ignore the obvious wounds, and reduce our personal risk by exposure. Countless people stared at my face as they passed by me or looked past me to prevent asking *the question*. A clerk in a boutique (out-of-town) avoided looking at

me the entire time I asked her about some of their merchandise. A co-worker talked to me pointing at her papers rather than looking me in the eye. I'm sure their minds were filled with all kinds of scenarios like "Who hit her? I'm not asking. It will either embarrass me or make her cry." In other words, "I'm not going to get involved."

And, for the few that bluntly spit out their comments, I'm grateful. Our neighbor spurted out, "Geez...what happened to you? What did the other guy look like?" in his humorous way. It was so much easier than being ignored by people who wondered and didn't ask. At least he acknowledged that I wasn't the "normal me." Once someone asked, I was relieved to explain my un-pretty fall from grace. Then there are those special friends who know how to make difficult things okay. I came upon one such friend in the hallway at work. She took one look at my bruised and wounded face—displayed a brief moment of astonishment, and then she burst into laughter as she blurted out, "What the heck happened to you?" The awkward moment became bearable.

The Wounds of Grief

People who grieve suffer from the wounds of grief and find that healing sometimes takes longer than anticipated. There's no quick cure for pain and the band-aid approach can be more harmful than good. As grievers, if *we* think it is taking so long, you can only imagine what our friends and acquaintances are thinking about our healing process.

On the inside, sadness envelops our spirit. We feel defeated and lonely, and our energy is spent. We may struggle with remorse, guilt and troubling memories. Our fears take precedence. We over-protect our children. We fear losing our jobs due to reduced productivity. We are anxious about the future. We've lost our dreams. Our sense of meaning and purpose seems a moot point. We sometimes hide our wounds and they fester. Bitterness and defeat can easily overwhelm us. We are like the wounded animal that cowers and strikes at his enemy to survive. We can become subdued, beaten and broken by our wounds.

On the outside, face and body language shows the world our pain. We find it hard to smile. Our eyes may be red or puffy from tears. Our speech is often incoherent or barely audible. The worry frowns and character lines are deeper and more pronounced. Our shoulders slump. Our gait is slower. Our bodies lose their gentle bounce. Every ounce of our being is affected by the trauma we've experienced.

Typical Wounds of Grief

Each of us is affected differently by the intensity of our pain and our ability to deal with the slow effects of healing, but we are destined to feel at least one of these side-effects.

Abandonment, loneliness, loss of relationships

These produce major wounds and produce multiple side effects. It may take months and even years to heal from them. The problem is two-sided. Friends don't know what to say or how to act to a grieving spouse, parent, neighbor or friend; and we don't know what to say to them. Past relationships may have been built on mutual interests, social events, work assignments or community obligations. With the death of a "companion," friendships and relationships change. Sometimes they even disappear. We also choose to isolate ourselves from others, believing this is the best way to deal with the pain we are feeling. Over time we discover that isolation breeds resentment and the pain gets worse. Sometimes counseling or medication is required. Ignoring the pain will never heal an open wound, but pain management, whether medical or mental, does create healing results.

Wudda-cudda-shudda and "if onlys"

Our sentences often begin with these dubious words: "If only, I had called the ambulance sooner...." "I cudda prayed more...." I wudda performed CPR, but instead I called 911." If only I had come home when I sensed something was wrong." "I shudda watched him closer and he wouldn't have gotten hurt."

These terms are defined as the "voices in our head" that dictate alternative methods of doing something that is already done. They cause us to judge our actions and ourselves. The words instill regret and create self-doubt. These wounds run deep with guilt, anger and self-pity—often self-imposed. Without gentle healing and attention, they will fester and become deadly. Learning to let go of self-doubt and judgment will bring relief. Counseling and medical intervention may be necessary.

Loss of purpose, meaning. Loss of dreams.

Our lives are built on visions of hope. Loss of purpose, meaning and dreams produces long-term scars. We plan our weeks and years through dreams for the future. We work hard to "save" for the plans we've made. Typically, our plans include that someone special as a path to fulfillment. When someone special dies and our plans are interrupted, our life purpose is badly bruised. Our inclination is to "hold on" as a means of survival, but at some point, **letting go** is the only way to heal. These wounds heal when we allow the fresh air, new ideas and new choices a

chance to work in our lives. The scars may remain, but the ability to function returns.

If you are the First Responder: Acknowledging Someone's Wounds.

It is inevitable in life that you will meet someone who has been wounded by grief. You may be the "First Responder" to their emotional turmoil. So, how can you acknowledge the wound and set the stage for healing?

1. **Clean the wound.** First, and foremost, acknowledge the wound or the pain, inside or outside, that you discern the person is feeling. Say something briefly to put the person at ease and open the conversation: "I heard about your loss." "Or I'm sorry to hear about _____'s death." Or, "I'm sorry that you are so sad."
2. **Dress the wound and apply antiseptic as needed.** Explain, if necessary, that you don't know what to say. Or just be present to the griever's pain in total silence or through compassionate gestures like a hug, a hand on the shoulder or a heartfelt, "What can I do to help you?" Be present to their pain and allow them to tell their story.
3. **Apply a temporary band-aid, until long-term care can be found.** Offer support and encouragement that is comfortable to you. Create a moment of caring. This builds trust. If humor is appropriate (based on the individual), use it sparingly by relating a good story, or interesting parable from your own life or the life of a friend. Be helpful and identify their needs. Offer suggestions for continued care (such as clergy, support group, counselor).
4. **Treat the wound for recovery.** You aren't expected to be there for every phase of healing. But follow-up and keep in touch occasionally. Recovery is achievable with patience, time and a good support system. Each of us, as we grieve, is responsible for our own grief work that ultimately leads to personal healing. The grace of friends who continue to care along the way makes the process easier.

Healing Your Wounds

My wounds from my fall healed quickly, and there were no serious injuries or surprises as a result. I was fortunate. The bruises on the inside took longer than the broken skin on the outside. I realized that this event was a "setback" but not a crisis. I was most comforted by a favorite quote: *Pain becomes bearable when we are able to trust that it won't last forever, not when we pretend that it doesn't exist.*" (Alla Bozarth-Campbell)