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NOPE Support Group Offers Comfort to Grieving Families

Unique support group helps families who lost children and other relatives to drugs get through daily life. Members turn to each other particularly during the holiday season, when there are constant reminders of loved ones who aren't there anymore.

By Leon Fooksman

A few weeks before Thanksgiving, members of NOPE Task Force's support group were asked what they were doing for the holiday.

For most of these 13 parents who lost children to drugs, the family-centered holiday rekindles painful memories.

Many said they were going away because they weren't prepared yet to open their homes to relatives and friends. Some, though, were thinking about hosting again, as a step to move past their tragedies.



"I'm nervous," said Margie Galassi, who was planning to invite family back to her holiday table for the first time since her son, Jeremy, 27, died nearly two years ago.

Almost everyone sitting at the table in a conference room leaned in to support Galassi, who looked overwhelmed. They told her to keep the dinner simple, easy and, most importantly, stress-free. Moments later, Galassi cracked a smile and seemed to gain the confidence to move forward with her dinner plans.

Offering encouragement and sharing feelings, no matter how uncomfortable and personal, is the goal of the NOPE support group in West Palm Beach.

Under the direction of Debra Ainbinder, a psychology associated professor and graduate program director at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., the group is a place for parents and relatives to openly discuss their problems, process their feelings, and hear others talk about their situations. Most members know each other's stories, often finding connections in the way their loved ones had lived.

Unlike other support groups for the grieving, NOPE's group is only for family members whose loved ones died of drug poisoning. It was created about two years ago to confront the unique challenges facing people who tried to do all they could but were unable to save their relatives and friends from addiction to illicit drugs and prescription painkiller pills.

"I wouldn't be here if not for the people I have met at this group," Galassi said. "The people here make me realize I'm not crazy."

Galassi and the other group members turn to each other for support even more during Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas and New Year's Day, the traditional holiday season to gather with family and friends. For them, it's a painful time of year, when there are constant reminders of loved ones who aren't there anymore.



Experts like Ainbinder suggest grieving families need to do “whatever it takes to make them feel good” through the holiday season. That includes allowing other people to comfort them, getting enough rest and doing something for others like volunteering at a soup kitchen. (See more holiday coping tips below.)

“There is no right or wrong way to celebrate,” Ainbinder told the group.

Families in mourning need to find support in friends and groups to help manage the day-to-day ordeal of living through a time of trial, experts say. People enduring similar tragedies can help one another generate hope for their futures, find the humor in their situations, and bear witness to each other’s ups and downs, they say.

The NOPE support group meets once a month for about an hour. Similar groups are planned in other cities in Florida with NOPE chapters.

Shellie Bergman, whose son, Jules, 43, died three years ago, attends the support group regularly to connect with others “in the same situation.”

“This group makes me feel like I’m not alone and there’s no stigma here,” she said. “We’ve become friends.”

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Coping During the Holidays

For those experiencing a loss, October through January can be painful. Here are a few practical tips to get through this time:

PREPARE -- Emotions can be overwhelming; prepare beforehand.

ACCEPT -- Remind yourself that the difficulty of this time of year is seasonal and it will pass.

SOCIALIZE -- Don’t hibernate. Force yourself to go out even if it’s only for a short time.

LOWER EXPECTATIONS -- Movies and songs paint an unrealistic picture of the holidays.

GET UP AND MOVE -- Take care of your physical well-being. Healthy foods provide a boost; fattening and sugar-filled foods can worsen depression. Exercise produces natural stress reducers.

COPING STRATEGY -- Have the phone number of your counselor, pastor, rabbi, close friend or a hotline ready at your fingertips. Make the commitment to call someone if you get overloaded with negative thoughts.

LIGHT -- Get plenty of sunlight. Winter can take its toll on your emotions.

(Source: www.griefshare.org)