

## **In grief, acceptance is all**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

LAST week, I interviewed grief counsellor and co-founder of the Bereavement CARE centre in Sydney, Dianne McKissock, for my column on grief. In the discussion she talked extensively about the global grief we are feeling as a result of September 11, tensions in the Middle East, and increased intolerance, terrorism and racism around the world.

More importantly, she talked about how we can cope with global changes and our profound sense of helplessness and lack of control.

I found it to be one of the most insightful and helpful conversations I've had in ages and so have decided to follow last week's column on personal grief with a fuller transcript of our discussion on global grief.

The most important point McKissock made was that we cannot underestimate the extent of panic, fear and anxiety operating behind many of the seemingly ordinary things we are doing in our day-to-day lives in the wake of September 11 and in the midst of current global unrest.

She explained: "When we were little children our security and survival depended on what was predictable. We learned to interpret things - parental moods, tones of voices, body language - and predict what would happen. Which is why routine is so important for kids.

"As adults we set up a routine and go along thinking our world is safe and predictable, but then something happens that breaks our routine, some calamity that challenges our entire foundation.

"When princess Diana died it shook our foundations. She was the fairy princess. Most people believe that if someone is beautiful, rich or famous then their world is more predictable and safe. The public projected their dreams of happy ever after on to Di. But when she died a tragic death, we panicked.

"If that can happen to someone like her then what terrible things can happen to the rest of us? The loss of illusion caused a huge reaction.

"So too now. America is the geographical version of princess Diana. It is the big, beautiful, wealthy country. And then suddenly tragedy slips past her defences and this massive thing happens on September 11."

McKissock says that we are witnessing a severe and unspoken reaction to recent global events. As she discussed last week, when we are in grief we regress. We behave in the same way we did when, as children, we confronted our first crisis - running away, or having a tantrum, or getting angry.

"In the current world chaos, some people have adopted a carpe diem [seize the day] approach to life. They suddenly feel life is too short, so they say: 'Let's eat, drink and be merry.' This has precipitated a number of divorces and break-ups as many people in regression go out in search of pleasure and intense personal experience.

"Others have had the reverse reaction, clinging to their family and friends, advocating that there is only security in love. Many have left perfectly good jobs or careers, and restructured their priorities towards relationships.

"Some people are terrified to leave home in the current climate, others are taking more risks and gambling with life, taking sexual risks, travelling, fulfilling dreams, blowing all their cash."

These are personal reactions to fear and grief. But she says these regressive reactions are also happening on an international level. "Whole nations have gone into fight-or-flight. The US went into fight. That's made other nations go into flight - into reflection, introspection, depression, escapism.

"Globally we're looking for parents to help us. 'Can't somebody do something? Make us safe?' we beg. Which explains the swing towards the far right, as evidenced by Le Pen's success in France. There is this global craving for Big Daddy to make things OK. But then we find ourselves in a worse situation."

She says racism is further indication of global grief. "When we feel insecure our prejudices come to the surface. When we feel an inability to predict, we blame others. In order to feel safer we blame victims of rape and murder as if there was something they did that contributed to that occurring, so we won't do it and we'll be safe.

"In ignorance people say: 'America deserved what happened.' The same lack of logic has resulted in the surge of anti-Semitism in Europe, or anti-Arab sentiment or fear of refugees here.

"These are such regressive, irrational, child-like responses. In regression, we wipe out much of the information we have at our disposal."

So how do we regain a sense of control? McKissock is optimistic. "If enough people and friends talk to each other about what's really going on for them, then in conversation we may recognise that we're being over-simplistic, fearful or regressed. And we can then find a way forward by looking at all the information, not just parts of it."

And she believes its most important to adopt the Buddhist philosophy: Accept what is.

"Life is unpredictable and unsafe. And we are all going to die. There is so much freedom in admitting it and giving up the illusion of safety." Only in growing up can we find our true backbone, says McKissock.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 11 MAY 2002