

Beautiful actions ease the pain of recurring grief

By Ruth Ostrow

THERE is a biological aspect to grief that people are largely unaware of, according to grief counsellor Dianne R. McKissock, co-director of the National Centre for Childhood Grief (NCCG).

When we experience shock or emotional pain that comes from a death, a loss of some kind, or a break-up of a relationship, we start producing chemicals such as adrenalin and other fight-or-flight hormones. These help us cope with the initial moments of shock but then start to take us on a downward spiral, she says.

The sense of exhaustion that comes to us when we are grieving is often a result of stress hormones flooding and then receding in the body, and the lack of feel-good hormones that we need to maintain homeostasis.

The problem with the grief cycle is that it can start again so easily. When we see an "ex" in the street, hear a certain song that reminds us of someone, or see an old photo of a loved one who has died, the body is triggered back into a stress reaction causing sweating, tears, panic, anxiety, palpitations and sleeplessness.

McKissock maintains that among the greatest triggers for grief are significant dates such as Christmas, birthdays and the like. For people who have lost parents, the big triggers are Mother's Day and Father's Day, she says, which is why she is part of a group attempting to help people deal with their grief on these occasions.

The group is Trees For Mum (www.treesformum.com), which, in conjunction with the NCCG and in co-operation with municipal councils around Australia, has created ceremonies around the country where motherless sons and daughters of all ages – from toddlers to the elderly – can support the environment and remember their mum by planting a tree each Mother's Day.

Trees For Mum was brought to life by Deena Hanley Raphael and Lauren Adlam. Both women lost their mothers to cancer and wanted to provide a network for other people who do not have mothers, on a day that can be particularly difficult. Meanwhile, the NCCG is also trying to establish similar ceremonies for Father's Day.

"Emotions come back to the surface no matter how long ago we lost someone, or how old we are. There are people who lost a parent 40 years ago who will still cry regularly," says McKissock.

She says whether you are grieving a parent, child, partner, friend, or loss of a job, one way to deal with grief is to do something on a physical level.

"I am not talking about jogging, or physical exercise that may further exhaust the system. I'm talking about activity that releases contracted muscles and allows the adrenalin to drain from the body; activity that promotes a sense of well-being like walking on the beach, singing, dancing, with someone close who can support you.

"Planting trees – either as part a public ceremony or in private in your own garden – is another great way," she says of this three-fold blessing. Firstly, the act of planting is in itself wonderful invigoration. "Being out in nature, breathing

deeply, getting your hands dirty, this is all good stuff for getting the blood pumping and oxygen flowing. It's a circuit breaker from grief."

Secondly, it's honouring a loved one in a way that is significant. Ceremonies are very important during transition periods, she says.

Finally, planting a tree is a fantastic and worthwhile gift not just to the memory of the person who's passed on, but to the planet.

She is right. Often when people are suffering grief they want to do something meaningful in honour of the person. One of my friends, environmental activist and award-winning Australian documentary maker Paul Tait, told me a story. When his daughter died, he and his wife, producer and director Jeni Kendell, wanted to do something commemorative.

In 1980 they made the first anti-logging film, *Give Trees A Chance*, based on the efforts to save the Terania Creek rainforest. The then NSW Premier Neville Wran was reputed to have been so moved by the film's message he was instrumental in changing the government's policy on environmental issues. The Taites went on to make other documentaries and have saved forests and villages around the world.

"We had stood in this magnificent rainforest with our daughter. Terania Creek was our first experience of a rainforest and we were completely blown away. After we lost our child, the thought of losing those beautiful, ancient trees touched us deeply. It was the cutting down of life and it was somehow a metaphor for the untimely cutting down of her life.

"After our loss we realised we had to look after Mother Earth and ourselves. Our hearts were full of pain and passion. There was no grief counselling in those days. We just dealt with the loss by talking, and sharing together and trying to find ways of helping the world."

McKissock says planting trees is a shift from victim to creator. "We are not helpless. We can't prevent tragedy and pain, but what we can do is create something else beautiful," she says.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in *The Weekend Australian* SAT 26 FEB 2005