

Time helps you forget, but doesn't heal, says speaker

Caezer Ng
Lakeside Leader

A grief and trauma expert spoke to educators and representatives of social agencies on Nov. 24, offering in-depth information and tips on dealing with post-disaster emotions.

Dr. Jane Simington, at the beginning of her presentation, explained the differences between trauma and grief. A person can experience grief without trauma, but there can be no trauma without grief; trauma is the result of overwhelming grief, to the point where people lose their ability to function.

"When we're searching for meaning, we ask 'why' did this happen?" she told the full house of 60 people at the Slave Lake Northwest Inn.

Although the speaker focused on children and youth, she said a lot of the information is pertinent to adults, who may be going through personal grief or trauma.

"We can't talk about youth without talking about you," Simington said.

There is no quick fix, said the speaker. Firstly,

symptoms of grief and trauma may not appear until the second year after a major event, be it a loss of an important person or a natural disaster, especially of Slave Lake's fire scale.

"I didn't want to tell you this, but in year two it'll be worse," she said bluntly. "You have to look at grief – it cannot be put on hold."

Simington has a background in nursing and psychology, and knows from experience what grief and trauma are. She told attendees her story when her 13-year-old son lost his life a number of years ago. The family tragedy was difficult for Simington and her daughter to bear. The mother became self-focused and left no energy to help her daughter deal with her grief.

Grief and trauma are not always obvious, but they can cause physical, mental and emotional problems, said Simington. A sufferer is more likely to be sick, fatigued, have eating and sleeping disorders and get night terrors.

Control plays a part in causing such mental

woes. In Simington's explanation, it is easier to leave a job than it is to get fired. Those who are involved in rebuilding are also more likely to recover more quickly. For example, the people of New York were able to get back on their feet more quickly after the Sept. 11 disaster, compared to victims of Hurricane Katrina. This is because the people of the northeastern United States area were more involved in the restoration process than the southerners.

As dramatic as the May fires were, not everyone will go through the difficulties grief and trauma bring. People who are dealing with multiple losses, and have a long and difficult history are most likely to lose their grip on their mental well-being because they "can't focus on a loss," Simington said.

Conventional wisdom teaches people that time helps forget memories, but it does not heal, Simington warned. She once saw a 93-year-old client because he had never dealt with his grief and anger.

The flip side of time is that experience helps develop tools for coping, so adults are generally better at dealing with grief than young people, Simington said. Children and adolescents may have experienced a loss for the first time as a result of the fire, such as losing a close friend whose family has moved out of the community.

Young people might also have lost pets.

"A good, quiet kid may act out," said Simington.

To deal with grief, she suggested to people to honour their losses and honour periods of silence. Adolescents often go into withdrawal for these reasons.

"They need permission to do that," said Simington.

Teachers and coaches can be effective 'grief counsellors', due to the position they are in. Studies have shown that art and physical activity help relieve built-up grief. Instead of sending students home, they should devote some energy to physical exercises and the arts.

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Researchers have long suggested the power of art as therapy, but this theory has only been confirmed by studies of MRI scans in 2004.

Due to the sensitivity of the subject of pain and grief, a teacher asked Simington whether it is appropriate to ask students about their emotions. Simington encouraged teachers to ask,

but instead of dispensing advice, teachers should support student choices and their own strategies for coping.

She had some handy advice for adults and children.

“Be gentle with yourself and others,” Simington suggested.

“Preplan events you know will be difficult, such as holidays, anniversaries and other major events. Things will never be the same. Allow yourself moments to feel okay.”