

Coping with loneliness and loss during the holiday season

By Emily Morrison

Facing the holidays alone or bereft over the loss of a loved one can be a demoralizing prospect. While it appears that the rest of the world is singing joyous carols, decking halls, trimming trees and planning festive celebrations surrounded by loving relatives and friends, the holiday season can be a time of anxiety and even despair for those who have suffered acute loneliness or loss, according to Sister Susan Schantz, SSJ, chaplain at Highland Hospital.

It's no wonder that at holiday time, the recently widowed, divorced or separated often imagine they are the only "uncoupled" souls on the face of the planet. Yet even those who have been single for many years frequently feel that they are perennial guests at family celebrations, says Sister Susan, who, as a member of a religious order, professes firsthand knowledge of the problem.

At a workshop offered December 6 at the Holiday Inn Holidome by the Women's HealthSource at Highland, a hospital-based center for health information of interest to women, Sister Susan reached out to a roomful of women who had suffered some type of loss or found themselves facing the Christmas season alone. Some were newly widowed, while others were divorced, separated, single, newcomers to Rochester or parents of adult children who had recently moved away, leaving behind them the depression that often accompanies the "empty nest" syndrome.

"Just by coming here, all of us are acknowledging the potential for experiencing pain, loneliness and loss, at a time of year when it's difficult to admit it publicly," said Sister Susan, a Nazareth College graduate who earned her master's degree in divinity at St. Bernard's Seminary and has served as chaplain at Highland since 1978.

A central goal of the one-and-a-half-hour workshop, added Sister Susan, was to afford participants an opportunity to hear the stories of people in similar circumstances, and to learn from others' experiences as well



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

"Give yourself the freedom to choose a new style of celebrating or relate to your sources of support in a different way," counsels Sister Susan Schantz, as part of her prescription for healing the pain of loneliness or loss at holiday time.

as their own. By the conclusion of the workshop, Sister Susan hoped participants would be able to formulate a plan for coping with what she described as "the dark side of the holidays."

As director of Highland Hospital's Bereavement Program, Sister Susan certainly has a wealth of experience to draw on. Every three months, she welcomes back to Highland the families of patients who have died. After attending an interfaith memorial service, family members meet in small discussion groups with Sister Susan, two nurses and a social worker. "Participants are encouraged to express their experiences and emotions," reads a feature article on Sister Susan's ministry that appeared in Highland Hospital's newsletter. "They then have the opportunity to receive support and validation from others."

The special burdens carried by any newly

bereaved person may make this holiday season seem particularly troublesome, according to Sister Susan. "This year might have held experiences that will change the way we view the holidays," she observed during the December 6 workshop, citing, for example, the death or illness of a loved one, separation or divorce, and changes in employment, place of residence or religious experience.

Participants may have also undergone what Sister Susan referred to as "some interior experience that makes us a little bit shaky moving into the holidays, when we spend more time with families or go to parties." Such experiences include recovery from alcoholism or compulsive overeating, she said.

However, she noted, this year might indeed be as anxiety-provoking as any other at holiday time. "Any holiday year can be a

tough one for us," she said. Even in families not afflicted by loneliness or loss, she pointed out, fantasies of idyllic family scenes vie with fears of what will happen when the entire family is assembled in a single house. Fantasies about giving the right gifts or receiving everything you wanted for Christmas produce additional anxiety, as do preconceptions about religious faith or fears that we don't believe as strongly as we should.

Following her opening remarks, Sister Susan divided the group into four sub-groups formed to discuss holiday concerns. Participants were asked to list possible solutions to the theoretical problems of a person who faces the holidays without the support and company of in-town relatives, a recently divorced woman with two teenaged children, a new widow whose three grown children have high expectations of the family's holiday ritual, and a single person who feels lonely even at family celebrations.

Responses ranged from doing good deeds for less fortunate people to ignoring the holidays altogether. In the category of reaching out to others were such suggestions as inviting to holiday celebrations others in the same situation or even underprivileged children, sharing family or ethnic traditions, visiting shut-ins at hospitals and nursing homes, joining or forming support groups, and taking the children to serve dinner at an open-door mission.

Inward-directed remedies included taking a trip, decorating the tree by yourself, keeping yourself physically healthy, and pretending Christmas is a day just like any other. "Treat yourself to a nice Christmas present," one woman suggested, citing the example of an enterprising widow who bought herself a diamond ring on her husband's birthday.

Sister Susan cautioned against tipping the balance toward doing things for other people, especially when the loss is recent. Don't be preoccupied by what *isn't* there any

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