

GRIEF & BEREAVEMENT MINISTRY

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Institutions help sort out feelings of grief

When a loved one dies, it's common for people to turn to friends and family for comfort.

But it's just as important for a person's workplace, school or parish to respond with support when someone in such institutions loses a loved one, according to representatives of various diocesan institutions and groups.

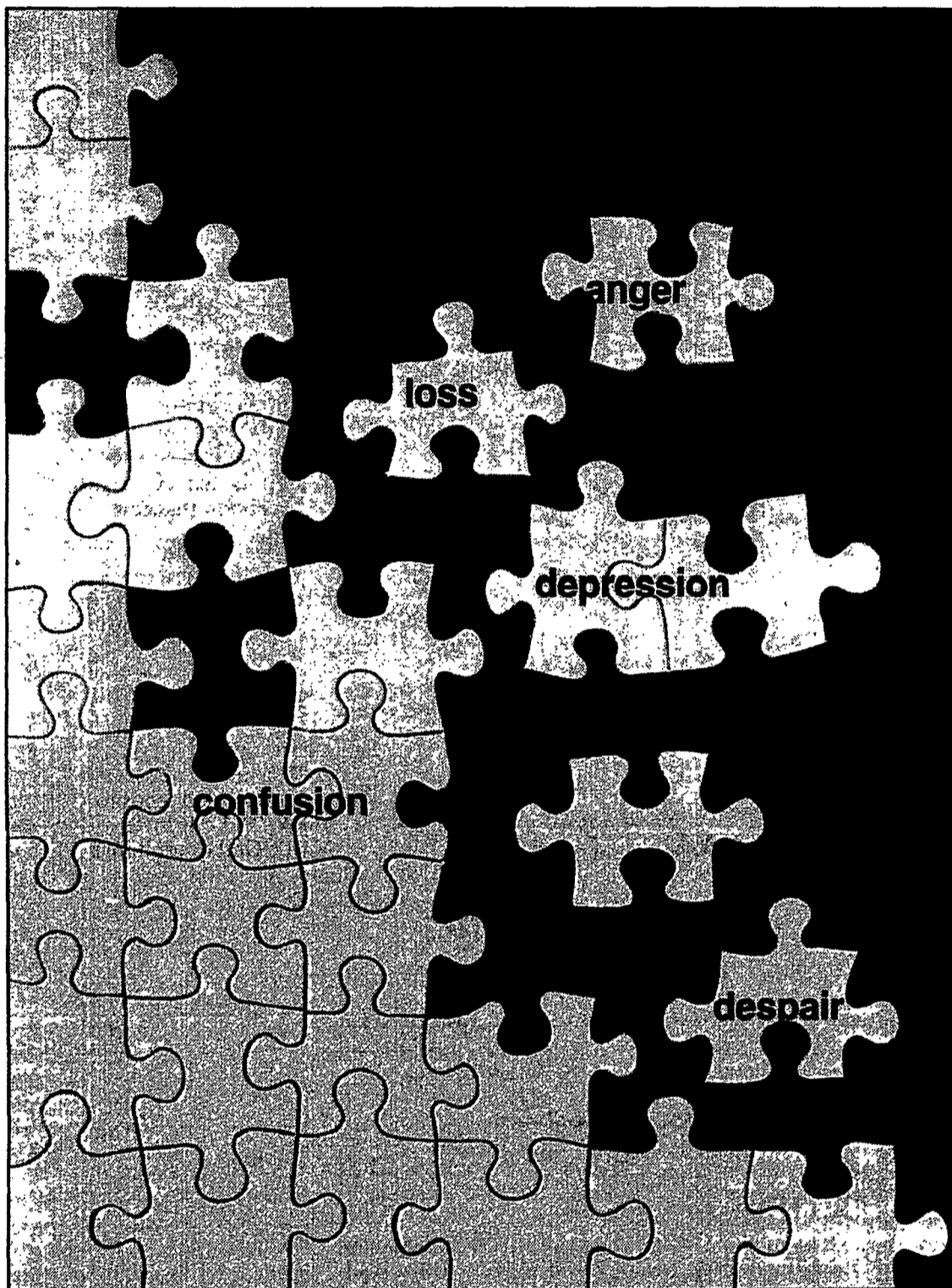
Fast-paced modern society is not the best place for many people to sort out their grief, according to Joanne A. Dermady, supervisor counselor of the Employee Assistance Program at Park Ridge Mental Health Center in Gates. Park Ridge's EAP is used by about 140 businesses and institutions, including the Diocese of Rochester, she said. The Park Ridge EAP offers some initial counseling sessions to clients' employees, and then refers them to other professionals if more counseling is needed, she said.

Dermady and other experts pointed out that the three days off from work most people get when a loved one dies is hardly enough time to deal with the swirling emotions brought on by the death of someone close.

"Grief affects people in as many different ways as there are people," Dermady said. "Getting back into your routine is something a lot of people have problems dealing with."

That's a view shared by Wendy Strauss, director of the Employee Assistance and Counseling Services Department of Catholic Family Center in Rochester. CFC serves 100 companies and institutions, including some diocesan parishes, through its EAP, she said.

Both Dermady and Strauss cited several common symptoms of grief, including an inability to focus on one's day-to-day duties and increased absenteeism at work. Grieving people sometimes find



it difficult to sleep and eat, Strauss added, and, at their worst, contemplate thoughts of suicide. Like Dermady, she pointed out that modern society doesn't always respond well to the needs of the grieving person.

"You're expected to perform just as you were performing before," she said.

Over the last several years, however, a number of employers have recognized the need to provide

grieving employees counseling referrals, both women said. Strauss added that the move to offer EAPs was motivated by both employer altruism and pragmatism.

"(The employer) knows

that there's an avenue that their employees can go through so that it won't affect their work," she said.

Employers aren't the only ones to recognize that the grieving process takes time, and, in some cases, needs outside intervention. Schools and parishes in the diocese often provide an array of formal and informal support to the grieving.

Teachers at DeSales High School in Geneva are expected to monitor the behavior of any student dealing with a loved one's death, according to Edward J. Tracey, principal.

"A certain faculty member will make it their business to watch the student,"

he said.

He pointed out that students suffering a loss can either grow indifferent to school, or disruptive in class. Hence, it's important for the DeSales staff to acknowledge the grief a student is experiencing, he said.

The school also offers food and other goods to the families of those who have lost someone, as well as tuition assistance — as needed — to students who have lost a parent, he said. He added that the school's Catholic outlook helps many students deal with death in their families.

"So many of the kids here are faith-filled that their faith is a great source

of help to them," he said.

In Rochester, St. John Fisher College will create a network of concerned individuals to look after students the moment one of them loses a family member or a student dies, according to Father Paul English, CSB, director of campus ministry. Such a network would include everybody from the college president to the student's professors and friends, he said.

"Everybody gets involved in some way," Father English commented, adding that professional counseling is also available to the grieving.

St. Lawrence School in Greece, which houses a pre-kindergarten-to-eighth-grade program, has rallied several times in the recent years around students who have lost family members, according to Sister Diane Dennie, SSJ.

"At times of serious family illness or death, this community has organized ongoing prayer for the family and whatever else is appropriate and needed in the situation — babysitting, making lunches, grocery shopping, making meals and delivering them and financial help," she said.

One year saw five families in the school lose a parent, she said, making the mourning process a schoolwide phenomenon that touched all the school's students deeply.

"In the case of a classmate losing a parent, there's a fear of not knowing what to do or say with that classmate, or at the wake or funeral," she said, adding that teachers will talk about what to say with their students.

"There's also a fear about something happening to one's own parent," she added. "Some cry because of this, and the little ones sometimes are afraid to leave their parents to come to school."

In addition to school and parish staff, St. Lawrence

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