

# Overcoming grief likely to be a long, hard process

By GREG MARX

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Local communities are just beginning this week to come to terms with the grief inflicted by the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. But several things are important to remember, say specialists on grieving: the grieving process will take time, it will require communication and it will depend on deep and long-lasting support.

"As a culture, we don't do very well with grief," said Nancy McWilliams, a visiting psychology professor at Rutgers. She said the lack of specific rituals in America, coupled with the fact that many of the victims' bodies may not be reclaimed, may "make mourning a little bit harder."

But there are many ways we

can help others grieve, she said. She encouraged concerned people to provide emotional support not just now, but in the weeks and months to come, when bereaved families often feel abandoned. "I think the point when people will need our compassion most is still a bit in the future," she said.

McWilliams urged people to ask others how they might best provide support. "Sometimes the most empathic thing is to say, 'Is this helpful for you? How do you want me to relate to you?' That's the best we can do," she said.

Large memorial services that draw communities together help "make it real," she said. "These memorials make people feel much less lonely. They allow us as a group to express emotions we would normally suppress, and see other people with the same

emotion."

Communities can also begin to heal, she said, by "finding ways that good can come out of (a tragedy)."

In the wake of the Oklahoma City bombing, she said, college scholarship funds were created for the children of victims. "A similar thing could be done here," she said. "It helps us feel as if the deaths have not been in vain."

Children in local communities may be especially at risk in this time.

Parents should minimize the exposure of children aged 6 and under to the attack, said Rutgers assistant professor of counseling psychology Caroline Clauss-Ehlers.

Because young children have such a narrow perspective, she said, "they think the world is

coming to an end." Also, young children may not realize repeated images of the tragedy on television represent just one attack.

Children in elementary school may experience developmental regressions, she said, along with nightmares, reenactments of the experience, and a drop in school performance.

While younger children may regress, Clauss-Ehlers said, older children may try to grow up to quickly. She said teenage pregnancy and substance abuse are increased perils as adolescents "try to cling on to something as a way to cope."

Russell Kormann of the Rutgers Anxiety Disorders Clinic also expressed concern about adolescents. Some teenagers, he said, may misdirect their anger and widespread calls for patrio-

tism into violent attacks on Arab-Americans and others. "We really need to spend some time supporting those individuals," he said.

Parents and educators should encourage all school-age children to discuss their grief without pressuring them, Clauss-Ehlers said, and emphasize "proactive behavior" such as contributing to community relief efforts. "The most important thing is reassurance," she said.

"This isn't going to go away in a week," she cautioned. Symptoms of post-traumatic stress can surface six months after the fact, she said, and "parents need to look for warning signs."

Parents who are concerned about their children should contact their pediatrician or church or a local mental health agency for advice about counseling, she said.

Another especially affected group may be the survivors who lost coworkers and offices in the wreckage of the World Trade Center.

It is important that they "try to reestablish in a new location things that were familiar in the old location," said John Aiello, a social psychologist at Rutgers.

It is "extremely helpful," he said, for people who will now be sharing office space to reach out to their displaced co-workers.

"The key element is to provide and look for social support that buffers the emotions people may be dealing with," Aiello said.