

LOCAL

Holiday season can evoke memories of loss

■ Even experts can struggle with season

Rashda Khan
Special to the Standard-Times

Holidays are a part of life — just like birth and death. They come around whether we are ready or not.

"Holidays are challenging for everybody," said Karen Schmeltekopf, grief counselor and chaplain with Hospice of San Angelo. "Add to that a sick family member, the loss of a loved one or some other difficult time and the holidays become even harder."

San Angeloan Louann Cate is familiar with life's unpredictable nature. Five years ago she buried her husband of 30 years, and in January she lost her mother. Now she helps take care of her father, who is in a nursing home.

"When you fix something, or hear a certain Christmas song, you start remembering things, and that brings the tears," she said.

Cate, who is retired from the Region 15 Education Service Center, helped area schools deal with grief by providing training and counseling in cases of deaths connected to the campus. Despite her years of experience and knowing what to expect, personal tragedy still took her by surprise.

"I knew some of what would happen, but I didn't know how intense it would be," she said. "I felt like a rag doll in a tornado."

She realized she needed someone to help her through her grief just as she had helped others. "It doesn't matter what you do or what you know," Cate said. "When you're faced with the death of

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Karen Schmeltekopf,
grief counselor and chaplain with Hospice of San Angelo

someone close to you, don't go it alone. Reach out for help."

Cate turned to Hospice of San Angelo and Schmeltekopf. Besides providing care, counseling and resources for patients and their families, the hospice mission includes free grief care for anyone in the community.

"There is this expectation that everything has to be perfect" for holidays, Schmeltekopf said. "We sure make things difficult trying to get that mythical Hallmark family moment."

One of the biggest challenges patients and their families face is adjusting to new realities.

"People often say 'I love you' with food. What we often believe is that if somebody is sick, we need to fix something for them to feel better or they have to eat to feel better," Schmeltekopf said. "But that's not always true. Families have to learn how to show love through something other than food or feeding." The key is to be flexible, Schmeltekopf said, especially during holidays.

"Forget the big meal," she said. "And enjoy having the loved one there and your time together."

When Cate's mother was still living with her, holidays were about recreating her childhood experiences. "I would make things that I remembered her making," Cate said. "Turkey and dressing, green beans, mashed po-

tato, corn, rolls and lots of gravy."

Because her mother could only eat soft foods, Cate would shred and cut the turkey into small pieces and mix it in with a generous helping of gravy for her. And there were things, like the corn and beans, she couldn't eat. "I guess it wasn't so much about the eating, but the fixing and sharing," Cate said. "I'd be in the kitchen cooking, and she'd be sitting right there, so close. We'd be in there together."

Now her father remembers the things his wife used to make — like the best banana ice cream or his favorite candied sweet potatoes — and requests them from time to time. "And I'll make them for him because food is something we all shared together," Cate said.

But this year Cate faces her first Christmas without her mother, and that's hard. Schmeltekopf has simple advice for people in similar situations, "Be gentle with yourself."

Families are often at a loss of how to celebrate holidays after a loved one dies, Schmeltekopf said. Sometimes they need a complete change because it's too hard to do the holidays the way Grandma did them.

Other families might meticulously reproduce Grandma's recipe in honor of her memory.

"Whatever it is they decide to do is fine. Every family has different needs and ways of dealing,"

WHERE TO GET HELP

November is National Hospice and Palliative Care Month. HOSA offers support services for community members.

What: Hospice Of San Angelo
Where: 36 E. Twohig Ave., Suite 1100
Contact: 325-658-6524 or info@hospiceofsanangelo.org

Schmeltekopf said. "The important thing is to talk together as a family and decide. And include the kids in the conversation."

After her husband died, Cate realized that if she didn't change things, she'd still be living in the past. "The holidays are no longer 'our' holidays, it's 'my' holiday now. So I had to think about what would give me comfort. What does Louann want?"

"It's hard for people to let go, but when they do it's a huge part of the healing process," she said. "You have to give yourself permission to change things, and you have to give yourself permission to have emotions."

Time helps. Cate is still caught unaware by a certain smell or a tune that reminds her of her husband, and even after five years, she'll find herself with tears in her eyes. "When I can start breathing again, I realize that I still have the memories, and yes, I still tear up," she said. "But it just means that I have loved and been loved."

Cate said it's important to reach the point when you can put it in that perspective and realize that while certain people are no longer physically present in your life, "the relationship we shared will always be a part of my heart and my life."

FOOD, OTHER WAYS TO SAY 'I CARE'

People often want to help friends and families going through difficult times but don't know what to do or say. Karen Schmeltekopf, a grief counselor and chaplain with Hospice of San Angelo, and Louann Cates, a retired counselor and a client of hospice services, shared their experiences and some tips.

- Often caregivers and people who are grieving feel too overwhelmed, too stressed and too tired to fix healthy meals for themselves. As a result, many either gain weight or lose weight.
- Think smaller portion sizes when giving a gift of food. Instead of taking over a large casserole, pack things into smaller portions good for one or two meals. For example, make enchiladas and share four with a friend.
- Bring those who are grieving something healthy. Make sure they have fresh fruits and vegetables, maybe a bag of baby carrots. If easy, healthy options are at hand, people will eat them.
- Offer to do the grocery shopping. Sometimes just the idea of venturing out into a crowded public place is too much.
- Gift cards are good. After Louann Cate's husband died, a friend gave her a Sonic gift card. "She knew I like Sonic, and that was the best gift," Cate said. "I didn't want to go sit at a restaurant by myself. This way I could pick something up without worrying if I had exact change or not, without thinking about it too much." Cate added that takeout and restaurant foods can be healthy. For example, pick a baked sweet potato instead of fries.
- Don't say "I know how you feel," because you don't. Each person experiences grief in his or her own way. Just say "I'm sorry" and listen. Don't push or put pressure on someone who is grieving to do things that you think they should be doing. Let them cry and share. You don't have to say anything — just hand over tissues and be there.
- Hugs and short visits are good. "After my husband passed away, I had lots of friends and family stop by with food," Cate said. "I don't remember the food, but I remember the faces and the hugs."
- Cards and notes are important. Cate had a basket full of cards and notes she received, and she rereads them from time to time. "They are dear to me because they told me my friends and family cared," she said.
- Make time, stop and connect. "So many people come to your side when death happens; but as time passes, they don't check on you as much. They get busy with their own lives, especially in the holiday season, and that's as it should be," Cate said. "But just because a year or two has passed, it doesn't mean the hurt is gone. It's kind of friends and families to remember them."
- Understand that someone who is grieving can't do everything he or she used to do but don't hesitate to invite them to events. Those in pain or who are caring for others should not shut out family and friends. A caregiver needs to take time for him or herself, and spend time with friends and other family.
- Take care of yourself. "The truth is the healthier you are in the long run, the better you are able to manage the difficulties of grieving and caregiving," Schmeltekopf said. So go for walks, keep doctors' appointments, do something soothing, and eat well.

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