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Grief: 'Like peeling onion'

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DALLAS-Grief is like peeling an onion, according to author Doug Manning: "It comes off one layer at a time, and you cry a lot."

Manning, who runs an Oklahoma City-based publishing house specializing in resources regarding grief and aging issues, spoke recently at a senior adult ministry meeting sponsored by the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.



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The former pastor of First Baptist Church in Hereford said Christians can help grieving family members and friends by understanding their pain. The first thing to recognize is that grief is a messy process, not a clear-cut series of stages each person passes through in a prescribed time period, he said.

“Grief is as unique as a fingerprint. Each experience is unique unto itself. There's no schedule, no right way to think, and no right way to peel away the layers.”

The days between a death and a funeral are like the paper-thin outer skin of an onion that comes off easily and blows away, he explained. Those are the days when the bereaved person is in shock and is surrounded by people

carrying casserole dishes.

"We give people the most help when they can receive it the least, when they are all awhirl," he said. "But the funeral is often the climactic event in the care and comfort offered by friends."

Once that superficial outer skin is removed, he said, then the real grieving process begins in three identifiable layers:

- ◆ Reality. A few weeks after the funeral, the shock wears off and the reality of loss sets in.

"That's when you crash," he noted, explaining that Christians can help at this point by doing three things—"hang around, hug them and hush."

- ◆ Reaction. At some point, anger emerges. "Anger is a natural reaction to being hurt. When the anger comes out, it means the grieving person has hit bottom and is starting to fight back," Manning said. "The problem with anger is that it doesn't float well. It needs a place to focus."

The object of anger may be the deceased person, a physician, a minister, a surviving family member or even God. Anger only becomes unhealthy when it becomes internalized and self-directed, Manning said.

At this point, the main thing the grieving person needs is a companion who will "get in their bucket with them" and walk with them through the process, he said.

- ◆ Reconstruction. Eventually, the grieving person will move on with life, but Christians can help them realize that life will never be like it was before the loss.

"A chunk has been bitten out of your heart, and it will never grow back," Manning said. "But we can offer assurance that the sharp pain will

eventually become a dull ache."

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