

Bereaved moms support bereaved moms

By [Cheryl Clock](#), The Standard

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An arm slides across her shoulders. She pauses a moment to look at her friend pressed up against her on the sofa, then smiles, takes a breath and continues her story about the day her only child died.

His name is Nick, she tells the group of women. And he was 22.

The hug from her friend comes easily. A simple gesture that means everything.

Her friend has tears in her eyes too. Tears of a mother who truly, deeply understands.

And somewhere in that most basic of human expression, is the essence of what this group is all about.

Bereaved mothers supporting bereaved mothers.

One mother living with the indescribable pain caused by the death of a child, offering unconditional understanding, compassion without judgment, strength, perhaps even a lifeline to another mother living with the indescribable pain caused by the death of a child.

An understanding that no one else in the world can give.

The gift of empathy, offered only to each other.

On this afternoon, in a Fonthill living room, eight mothers gather in a close circle to talk about what the group meant

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to them. They have all finished the sessions, offered through the Hamilton/Burlington chapter of Bereaved Families of Ontario. Some of them continue to meet on their own.

The mom's support group is led by Diane Martin.

A mom who also understands.

Her 18-year-old son, John-Micheal, drowned in the Welland Recreational Canal, at the Woodlawn bridge, just over eight years ago.

The exposed, raw edge of pain has healed to a point where it doesn't open up like a festering wound every day. She will always feel it. She will never be over it. She is a different person because of it. And now she facilitates support groups to help other moms.

She usually begins by telling them: "I'm just a mom like you who lost a child, and who is just further down the road than you."

That road is grief.

And while each of the stories that led them to the place where their lives intersected are different, and they are all at unique places on their journey, they share a bond of compassion.

Noreen Saltarelli's 21-year-old son, Spencer Death, died of asthma 10 years ago. She found him in the morning, in his bedroom.

The vehicle of time has taken Noreen further down the road.

In the beginning, you can't escape grief, she says. "It's embedded in you."

"Your family is thrown into a dungeon. It's dark and there's no escaping it."

Now, she has reached the point where she has been able to let go of some of his belongings. Where she can control when and how she immerses herself back into the horror of his death.

"As time passes, you realize, one day, for a minute, I wasn't thinking about it."

And, yet, she is absolutely clear on this point: "It is a never-ending journey."

Beside her is Nicole Taylor. Her son, Ryan, lived with fibromatosis, tumours that grew all over his body. He was 38 when he died four years ago. "It's never enough time," she says. "Even when you're expecting it, it's never enough time." She misses the feeling of his hand in hers.

Rose Horth is Nicole's sister. Her son, Brian, was also 38 when he died after a surgery for colitis. The sisters lost their children 10 months apart. Some time after his death, Rose accidentally burned her hand. She didn't want to take anything for the pain; wanted to feel pain like her son felt before he died. She doesn't expect people who have never had a child die to understand.

Tina Turner's daughter, Julia, was almost 16. She died of a brain tumour, seven months after being diagnosed. She would have graduated high school this year.

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Barb Dixon lost her best friend, her 22-year-old daughter, Kate, two years ago. "It feels like yesterday," she tells the group. Kate died in a car accident. Pearl Hughes' oldest son, 19-year-old Jake, died in an ATV accident in Haliburton. Barb and Pearl sometimes go for a walk together, just to talk. "I pretend to live a life," says Barb. When the women talk, they can be real to each other. "It's a release of the pretend," she says.

Rita Hachey's daughter, Alexandra, was born disabled. Rita cared for her day and night. Alexandra was 17 when she died. "I lost myself," she says. "I didn't know how to live life without her.

"I lost my identity, and I'm still trying to find it."

It is Rita whose arm is wrapped around her friend, Judy Micieli, as she tells the women about her son, Nick, who died at age 22, while on the job, doing road work in Milton. Rita and Judy met in the group.

"My spirit was broken," says Judy. "Your heart takes over who you are. You're so engulfed in grief; it's so raw for so long."

The group, the women, their stories, gave her comfort. "Their children became my children," she says.

The women talk about the pain of bereavement. About how other people get impatient and put a deadline on how long the hurt should last. About how, when they are just beginning to really feel the deep, unbearable pain, their support network withdraws because they "look OK."

"Most people say 'I can't even begin to understand what you're going through,'" says Tina. "And they're right. They can't."

The pain is physical. "You know when you're pushing a baby into the world, that guttural noise you make?" says Noreen.

"That is what comes out of you when you lose a child."

A primal wail. Like a wounded animal.

There were times she buried her head in a pillow because she needed to make that sound.

"I think it's your soul that's screaming," she says.

Adds Barb: "You can't believe you're living." The hurt is so intense, she remembers wondering how her body could continue to live under that amount of pain. She thought: "Why is my heart beating?"

Nicole says even breathing was difficult.

And it's not always sadness over what people might assume — missing the big milestones like birthdays and holidays.

"It's the little things that kill you," says Pearl. "Thinking you'll never do those things again."

Things like sitting around the dinner table. Looking forward to hearing about each other's day. Doing her son's laundry.

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For the longest time, Noreen couldn't bring herself to bake after Spencer's death. "I loved to cook and bake," she says. "Spencer would be up in his bedroom on the phone and I'd bring him hot muffins." Afterwards, it seemed pointless.

Barb says she doesn't go grocery shopping with her husband anymore. It's a routine, a reminder too fresh at this time of how Kate wrote items she wanted on her mother's grocery list. Barb sees her daughter's favourite foods in every aisle. A special ice cream. A brand of peanut butter with the peanut on top. These days Barb runs in and out. Short, focussed trips. No time to wander and think.

At times, grief brings them to places that, to other people, might seem bizarre. So odd, in fact, the women are hesitant to share beyond their group for fear of sounding unquestionably mad.

"Your mind goes to the most absurd places," says Noreen. She once thought that maybe, just maybe she could clone her son because she had a lock of his hair. Other women nod.

Says Pearl: "You crave that so much, it's painful." She tells the group how she places her hand inside her son's shoes, just to feel the shape of his foot.

Adds Rita: "You hold on to it for dear life."

The day Judy's son, Nick, died, as he headed out the door to work, he emptied a duffle bag of clothes on the stairs, an affectionate way of asking his mom to do his laundry. The pile remained there for two weeks after his death. Judy would sit on the stairs, pressing his clothes to her face, smelling his cologne. Crying. Unable to move it anywhere.

Scent is a powerful connection to their children.

Rita inhales the fragrance of baby powder on her daughter's clothes, left in a hamper. "It's the closest thing you have," she says.

Tina washes herself with the same Dove shower gel she used to bathe Julia in.

Barb wears her daughter's brand of perfume.

Yet, where there is pain, there is also laughter. These parents want to talk about their children. They tell stories. Share memories. And laugh.

Noreen says it took her a long time to realize that laughter is not betrayal.

"We want to validate them; keep their memories alive," says Rita.

Tina talks about her enjoyment of finding "lost" photographs and videos. Pictures people give her of Julia, that she otherwise would never have seen. "She's there again," says Tina. "And it's new."

Some have tried other, more general bereavement groups. But talking alongside people who've lost mothers, grandparents, spouses, other loved ones, albeit tragic, just isn't the same.

After they are done talking, they gather for cheese and crackers. And continue talking more.

"Even if we never see each other again," says Diane, "we are connected forever." cheryl.clock@sunmedia.ca