



Harold Keepert joined Hospice of Lancaster County's men's breakfast group in September, six months after his wife Marlan died. "We can use (the support) these days," says Keepert, of Millersville. "That's why I come here."

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Sharing in loss

Men's breakfast group finds life goes better with a side of coffee

By MARY BETH SCHWEIGERT
New Era Staff Writer

SOMETIMES ELI WENGER would get in his car and just drive.

He'd park at Lancaster Airport and watch the planes take off and land.

Anything to escape the devastating emptiness of his Akron home.

Ruth, Wenger's wife of 55½ years, died of Parkinson's disease in July.

At first, Wenger quietly grieved at home, haunted by Ruth's clothes still hanging in the closet and her memory waiting around every corner.

"It wasn't easy," he says. "I had some

rough days. It's a hole in my life."

After two months, Wenger realized he needed help coping with his grief.

Men often grieve more privately than women, avoiding support groups or reaching out to others.

In fact, two-thirds of Hospice of Lancaster County's grief support group attendees are women.

"We had in the back of our mind for quite a while to do something for men," says Patti Homan, program director of Hospice's PATHways Center for Grief and Loss.

"We wanted to offer them a place that would feel comfortable for them."

That place turned out to be over coffee,

eggs and toast — with a side order of guy talk — at The Apple Tree Restaurant in Centerville.

Dan Farmer and Norm Yunginger, both widowers and Hospice volunteers, started the men's breakfast group last spring.

They saw women in Hospice's largest support group — loss of spouse — making plans to get together outside the group.

The men just headed for the parking lot.

"(For women) it comes easy to exchange phone numbers or grab a bite together," says Farmer, whose wife, Marilyn, died of brain

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Warren Mease (from left), Greg Caldwell, Dan Farmer and Eli Wenger have found comfort in sharing a monthly breakfast with other men whose wives have died.

Grief

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cancer in 2001.

"Men don't tend to do that. In fact, we have a hard time even attending."

The social nature of breakfast appeals to men who may be too intimidated to attend a support group and would otherwise sit at home.

"The common thread among men is they don't get out," says Yunzinger, whose wife, Nancy, died of ovarian cancer in 2003.

The men's breakfast group has no speakers or programs — just good, honest guy talk.

(But mourning isn't off-limits. Someone having a bad day will find many understanding ears.)

The dozen or so current attendees have all lost their wives, but the group is open to men grieving any loss.

Many men, Homan says, keep their grief inside, for fear of burdening others or showing weakness.

They might, for example, read every book in Hospice's grief-resource library but not attend a support group.

"A bunch of guys getting together socially for a meal seems more comfortable," Homan says, "especially if it isn't labeled a 'support group.'"

By 8 a.m. on a recent Tuesday, the coffee and conversation are flowing.

The men have already covered most of the important topics: politics, Christmas shopping at Park City, traffic, holiday plans and Penn State's bowl-game prospects.

"We've solved a lot of the world's problems already," Gene Jennings jokes.

They also discuss the term "widower." (They hate it. "It sounds like a title, don't it?" Wenger says.)

The men — many retirees, some veterans of World War II — have lost wives of 41, 54, even 63½ years.

"It doesn't matter what they do in life," Wenger says. "They're still beautiful people to get along with."

"We can talk about things."

Harold Keepert, who works in grounds for Penn Manor School District, has permission to be late for work once a month.

"We can use (the support) these days," says Keepert, of Millersville. "That's why I come here."

Coming here took some con-



FOR YOUR INFORMATION

The men's breakfast group (above) meets 7:30 to 9 a.m. the fourth Tuesday of every month at The Apple Tree Restaurant, 100 S. Centerville Road, Lancaster.

The group is free — attendees do pay for their own breakfasts — and open to all local men grieving a loss.

Hospice of Lancaster County's PATHways Center for Grief and Loss offers support groups, programs and a resource library to all grieving people.

For more information, call 391-2413 or visit hospiceoflanaster.org.

HOW TO HELP A MAN WHO'S GRIEVING

- Provide a "safe place" for him to mourn. Listen when he wants to talk. Let him know it's OK to express sadness, anger, guilt and fear.

- Invite him to shoot hoops,

play golf, hike or go fishing. He might open up about his feelings during these activities.

- As the "protector" of his family, a man may feel guilty about a death, even though it was out of his control. Listen and try to understand his feelings. He will work through them his way, in his own time.

- There is no "right" way to mourn. He might feel and express rage, be more cognitive or analytical about the death or not cry.

- Avoid clichés like "You'll get over this" or "Think about the good times." They diminish a very real and painful loss.

- Be available after the funeral. He may need you more weeks and months after the death than right away.

- Holidays, special occasions and anniversaries are a great time to visit, write a note or call him.

— Source: Hospice of Lancaster County

vincing for Warren Mease, who says he's not outgoing.

Now he's glad he came.

"This is a great group of men who put up with my hearing (problems)," says Mease, of Neffsville.

At 29, Greg Caldwell is younger than most of the men by a couple of decades. In Hospice's loss of spouse group, he shares his feelings on the death of his wife Michele to melanoma.

But breakfast is more about good times than grief.

"This is more just guys talking about guy stuff," Caldwell says. "It's fun to be able to do that."

Farmer, who is now remarried, says grief is a journey that takes

hard work — and solid support — to weather.

"You find a new normal and emerge out the other side," Farmer says. "Life, in fact, does go on."

And it goes just a little better with coffee — and friends who understand.

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