

**May 15, 2008 Taos News Article
Breaking Patterns within the Family**

The Taos News has committed to implement a weekly column to help educate our community about emotional healing through grief. People may write questions to Golden Willow Retreat and TeamBuilders Counseling Services and they will be answered privately to you and possibly as a future article for others. Please list a first name that grants permission for printing.

Dear Willow:

My Mother is dying of cancer. She has lived a wonderful, full life and has made peace with her Family and with God; but my father refuses to accept this. He is a good man but doesn't seem to deal with a situation he cannot "control". He is angry with GOD, and he is taking it out on everyone around him. He reminds me of an injured animal who has backed himself into a corner. He will growl at me and bite my hand if I come too close to his "territory", my Mother. How can I deal with my father with love and compassion? Loving Daughter

Dear Loving Daughter,

You are in a situation that more and more people are experiencing today and it is hard and there are many losses. Your parents (or guardians) are your first caregivers and they possess the strength that allows you to survive. They give you shelter, food, water, protection, knowledge and experience. In many ways they are your first higher power as through them you are given the chance for life. As time passes the hope is that you start to become your own individual, this process is called individuating. As you mature your parents are no longer in charge of all aspects of your life and slowly they let you go and you soar with your own wings making the decisions that impact your life. Your parents may become more like friends, wisdom keepers, and hopefully someone you love and respect but are no longer your caregivers. Psychologically there may be parts of you that hope they are still your higher power and parts of your psyche will still be working out these issues throughout your entire life. As the family system is changed through something like cancer, all of the pieces of that family system are shaken up and what used to work within the family system is now no longer in place. Everyone's roles change when the fragile system is shattered. Your dad is most likely going through one of the toughest times in his life as his partner is surrendering to her new situation. A partner having to surrender to watch and witness his spouse die can be excruciating. It also is a situation where it cannot be "fixed" by that partner, which may have been one of his roles in life. Here is something he cannot fix and the frustration, fear, and feelings of helplessness can be overwhelming. Your dad is in a grief process (just like you!) in which he is going through the phases of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. And you are experiencing both the primary grief of your mother's illness and the secondary grief of your father having to witness. As

your dad's grief phase of denial will start to weaken, anger will step in to protest this situation and the fear of the relationship change. Underneath this anger and denial is a level of bargaining from "what can I do?" to "I should have done _____." Quite often these two aspects of the grief phases present themselves when someone is sick. Watching someone you love become ill and possibly die is an enormous whirlpool of emotional feelings and actions. And with emotions being out of balance, most of the time actions are not as balanced. Often the partner who does not have the illness is disenfranchised for their loss, due to the other partner's situation is so prevalent. When fear and denial have pushed someone into the corner there is often anger and rage. This anger is the last chance to fight to preserve what life was like prior to the illness. In allowing compassion for your dad and understanding the difficulty of his experience, you will be able to give him his space to do his process. This does not imply that you do not need to set your own boundaries as you experience a similar process as your dad with your mom, in witnessing both of them hurt as they work with their present situation. By setting boundaries with your father as to what you are willing to accept and giving him space with love, you still honor his world while making sure he is safe and allowing him to have some sort of control where there is none, it's tricky work. One of the most important boundaries you can set is your internal boundaries of what you can do and what you must surrender. It is almost like trading places with your parents in that you are now the one who will show compassion boundaries and love, while you also provide wisdom, maturity, and peace. You cannot control another person's grief, so finding how to help your mom, be there for you dad, and continue to take care of your own needs and health is hard but possible. I hope you seek support as you individuate from your parents with love and health during this difficult time.

Until next week, take care.

Golden Willow Retreat and TeamBuilders Counseling are nonprofit organizations focused on emotional healing. Please direct questions to Ted Wiard Founder of Golden Willow Retreat and Assistant Clinical Director of TeamBuilders Counseling Services at 575-776-2024, GWR@newmex.com, or fax to 575-776-2824.