Is This Normal? by Linda Hopkins, Bereavement Coordinator

When I started grief support work, one of the first lessons I learned came from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, a widely recognized educator on grief. He wrote an article about the “going crazy syndrome.” I recognized wondering “am I losing my mind?” from my own experiences years before after my father died when I thought I was doing ok but did things like drive twenty miles past my exit on the highway with no memory of the miles passing. I have learned that like me many people attend visiting hours and services thinking they are fully present and then later look at the guest book and have no memory of many of the people who signed it being there.

Grieving people often have experiences that make them question the soundness of their minds. It is common even after months have gone by for people to go to call their loved one only to get to the phone and remember the person is no longer there. It is common for people to have a sense of a loved one’s presence and to have one-sided conversations although many hesitate to share this for fear of being thought to be “crazy.” One of the most memorable experiences I had a few weeks after my father died was stopping behind a car like his and having a physically intense feeling like he was the person behind that wheel in that car. The thinking part of my brain knew it was not him, but my gut and heart had feelings of their own.

Experiences like this are at the least humbling and at the worst scary. It is upsetting to not be able to function like usual. When we are grieving, we expect sadness, but we probably do not expect to have trouble concentrating, to be distracted and forgetful, to feel like we cannot think straight. In these Grief Notes we often speak of the importance of self care and this is especially important in the early weeks and months when grief is not only in the front of our minds but also is active subconsciously affecting our thoughts, feelings and ability to function.

Many of you have received Barbara Karnes’ booklet “My Friend, I Care” as we send it to share information about grief that we hope you find helpful. While we know people grieve in their individual ways, it is reassuring to find out that so many of the experiences people have that worry them are common occurrences for grieving people. I like this quote from Dr. Wolfelt on the going crazy syndrome: “While it may seem strange, keep in mind that your disorganization and confusion are actually stepping stones on your path toward healing.”

One of the difficult parts of grieving is that many of the people around us will be uncomfortable with our grief and will either avoid us or think they need to do something to fix us. If we are having “crazy” experiences, we may hesitate to share with them. Please get in touch if you would like to talk about available support. Your Northern Light Home Care & Hospice bereavement coordinator is available to help.