

Anne Bonnefin interviews David Abbott

David Abbott lives in Allora, Qld. Talking with him was so heart-warming and gave me some insight into the time and effort over the years he and his wife Val have put into supporting people in grief and loss. Anne Bonnefin

Anne: I am interested to hear of all the organisations that you are involved in since moving to Allora, Qld. three years ago.

David: I'm active in the Rural Fire Brigade as a volunteer. I have also joined the P&C - I don't have kids at school, but it's interesting to have input. I also teach Religious Instruction (scripture) at the local state school. I enjoy doing the study in preparation for instructing the class. I have 30 students now. Most tell me they don't go to church but they come to class. In QLD R.I. attendees out-number church attendance by about 10 to 1 and it has opportunity to be a positive witness to the next generation of Christians.

I go down to the Men's Shed three days a week. It's a good place to go and meet people and learn new skills. Members can sit down on the lounge and just chat if you want to, or get involved in different projects. Val and I attend the Uniting Church at Allora. There is no Community of Christ here but the churches are very ecumenical and we have opportunities to take part. Sometimes I'm asked to do the sermon or help with the planning of the combined churches meeting worship schedule.

Val also is able to share in worship presentations and Val also attends a Presbyterian women's KYB bible study and the Anglican Craft Group. She is also a Member of a women's organization called SCOPE, and volunteers in the local Op Shop run by SCOPE to raise money for the community. No time for boredom in Allora.

Anne: Can you tell me about your involvement in NALAG (National Association for Loss and Grief).

David: NALAG began advertising for volunteers in Taree and so Val and I went along to see what it was all about and we ended up staying on for 15 years. They are based in Dubbo, NSW. After we did our training to learn how to support clients with loss and grief I was asked to take on the role of Training Facilitator. I would organize all the classes as well do the training for new volunteers on the Mid Nth Coast of NSW. Val and I would keep up with courses of study. We did Mental Health First Aid, Suicide Prevention and Sand Play workshops - where children could express their grief in visual form.

Anne: What are the main things that you try and remember or you think are important when helping someone with grief and loss?

David: The main thing when supporting someone is that you have to be able to listen to their story, and listen non-judgmentally. When someone is telling you a story the thing is to remember to let them tell their story ... not to say "Oh I know how you feel - That's exactly what happened to me." Because then you are taking over their story. You have to listen and feed back to them so you know you have heard it correctly. They need to have the assurance that you have heard them. You could say "This is what I'm hearing." and they might say "No you've got that wrong and you can say "I'm sorry I got that wrong." I really want to understand what you've got to say and I'm listening to you." that way they know you are fully focused on them and you are not watching the clock.

So don't go to support someone with another appointment in mind half hour later. Your role is to give them that voice and for them to know that they have been heard. It's hard ... it's just human nature for us to want to share a similar experience and that's what a friend does. There is a difference between a friend and a support person. You have to sit there non judgmentally, listening to their story, giving them feedback and then allowing them to find ways which will allow them to grow and adjust to that loss and grief that they have. So rather than carrying them along the road you are saying "I'll walking with you." Telling their story allows people to identify, express and name their feelings. Such as, "I'm feeling angry?" "I'm feeling frustrated," "I'm annoyed." "I'm really upset." "I'm feeling depressed." "I'm feeling down in the dumps."

Anne: It seems you joined NALAG out of your own need but it seems very quickly it became about helping others.

David: Well yes.... We lost our son Andrew in 1995 and we found that there wasn't a great deal of support in Taree apart from church people. We found NALAG helpful for our grief and as time went on we thought - that's something we can do. At the time the church was emphasizing the need for priesthood to continue further education and we thought this would be helpful for our for ministry and support us with our own grieving. NALAG helped me understand the different phases of grief. That you could be feeling on top of the world today and tomorrow you could be on the way down ... and that is ok and normal. The loss that you have experienced is not something to get over. People might say "Oh you'll get over it in a few years" But I learnt that there is nothing to 'get over'. The loss is with you all the time, but you can learn to make adjustments to the loss and experience a new normal.

Grief is not just bereavement. It can be from the loss of your mobility, or loss of your independence. Most people tend to think of grief as when someone dies. But you can experience grief in the loss of your pet or a relationship or losing a job or retiring. Say you are the long term president of a club and then when you retire or change roles your circle of influence changes or the first months of retirement you are ok and then after that you may feel overwhelmed by grief... this can be about loss of identity.

Even COVID lockdown can give people a sense of grief and loss.

Anne: How do you help someone going through grief due to lockdown.

David: It's the same principle for all grief and loss. Allow them to tell their story. Even if you are in lockdown yourself you might feel like saying "Oh I'm in lock down myself I can't stand it." But you need to resist talking about yourself.

Just listen and reflect back to show them that you have heard them. Try to have them see the positive things they are able to do and acknowledge that; and also realise that sometimes people like to know they are not alone in times of crisis and stress.

