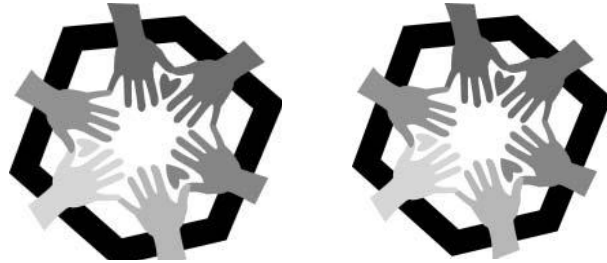


A Shoulder to Lean On

Support groups in Central Jersey offer a helping hand, comfort— and hope

BY KARA FITZPATRICK



EIGHT years ago, Judy Foster hired a private investigator to help her find the daughter she gave up for adoption when she was a teenager. The investigator, realizing this was a difficult decision for Ms. Foster, suggested she attend a local adoption support group. “I went on Saturday,” Ms. Foster recalls. “On Sunday, I was having dinner with my daughter.”

While not all resolutions come as quickly as Ms. Foster’s, participating in support groups, or group healing, can have a profound impact on people going through a difficult time, area experts say.

Central New Jersey offers dozens of support groups, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous and those that help people cope with drug abuse, domestic violence or the death of a loved one. “Support groups are important in the healing process because the group members get great comfort from sharing their stories and memories with other people who have experienced similar thoughts, feelings, behaviors and grief,” says Pat Kinkead, manager of the Samaritan Center for Grief Support, based in Marlton.

The Samaritan Center for Grief Support facilitates a number of support groups, including one that provides solace for daughters who have lost a mother and others that help people deal with the death of a spouse or the death of a pet. Sharing feelings, especially when coping with grief, is an important step in healing. Grief often seems overwhelming and isolating, so coming together with others who are experiencing similar emotions cuts down on those negative feelings, Ms. Kinkead says. “As people share their grief with each other, there is a feeling of safety, connection and hope for the future,” she says.

However, not all support groups help people handle loss. Some motivate people to stop addictive behaviors, and others, such as the Morristown Post-Adoption Support Group, provide a forum for support and encouragement. For Ms. Foster, who is now one of three co-facilitators of the Morristown Post-Adoption Support Group, encouragement was just what she needed when she made the choice to find her daughter after more than 30 years.

The Morristown Post-Adoption Support Group, which recently merged with a similar support group that was based in Hillsborough, attracts people from throughout New Jersey and New York. “It’s basically a group that comes together to share their stories of search and reunion,” Ms. Foster says. And even after people locate their biological family members, they still attend. “Many of us are reunited and continue to come. There are always issues that come up.” The group, which meets at 1 p.m. on the first Saturday of the month at the Presbyterian Parish House in Morristown, typically attracts 15 to 25 people, Ms. Foster says. Spending time together, she adds, is so important for those going through the adoption experience.

“When we all come together, it is the first time you’re together in a room with people who understand what you went through,” Ms. Foster says. “It’s very helpful in the healing process.”

And because attendees include parents who have given up their children for adoption, as well as children who have been adopted, meetings allow the two sides to share feelings. “The elephant is no longer in the middle of the room. You can talk about those feelings,” Ms. Foster says.

Comfort in sharing feelings is universal, regardless of what those feelings are. For Sarah Murphy,* **Overeaters Anonymous** has helped her cope with what she describes as a life-long addiction to food. Ms. Murphy, who lives in Edison, said her life changed after attending meetings of the Overeaters Anonymous of Central Jersey group. “Physically, there are

tremendous benefits,” she says, adding that she lost 80 pounds after she started working with the support group.

Overeaters Anonymous, which is structured similar to Alcoholics Anonymous in that there are 12 steps to recovery, meets at 5:30 p.m. on Sundays at the Merwick Unit of Princeton Medical Center on Bayard Lane in Princeton. “The steps are the same, but we substitute the word ‘food’ for ‘alcohol,’ ” Ms. Murphy says.

She began the program a decade ago, after learning about it from an acquaintance. “I had a long history of dieting and a long history of failed dieting. I was thirsty for something different,” Ms. Murphy says.

She describes overeating as a food disorder, much like anorexia or bulimia. “It’s all food, all of the time. It’s an addiction,” says Ms. Murphy, who has had issues with food since childhood. “We have a relationship with food that is above and beyond what most normal people do.” Attending Overeaters Anonymous, she says, drastically helped her break that cycle of food obsession. Aside from the physical satisfaction of gaining control of eating habits and losing weight, Ms. Murphy says the group provided invaluable emotional benefits. “You are able to have relationships with people,” she says. “I don’t think I would have been able to get married and have the relationships with other people. I’m a much more pleasant person to deal with because I like who I am.”

On top of the various support meetings, **Overeaters Anonymous** also pairs participants with a sponsor, who helps them create and stick to a food plan.

During the 10 years Ms. Murphy has participated in the support group, she has made large strides in coping with her eating disorder. “All of that garbage has been cleaned out of my character closet,” she says. “Emotionally, I am much more balanced.”

*Name changed to protect privacy.

For more information about the support groups offered by the Samaritan Center for Grief Support, visit www.samaritanhospice.org/griefsupport/supportgroups.html. For more information about Overeaters Anonymous of Central Jersey, visit www.oa-centraljersey.org.

