

“GETTING A HANDLE ON IT”

By Jackie Bates
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As I meet with people in my community, I gather tidbits of what they want and, more importantly, what they need, as we talk about end-of life issues. What is even more interesting and impactful is looking at their eyes when they are asking their questions and telling me their stories. People are seeking answers, help, insight and someone to simply hear what is in their hearts and minds.

At a recent lunch program, a young woman told me she had come to “get a handle” on what she will be facing in her future...again. This is not the first time she is trying to prepare for the loss of a loved one.

“Getting a handle” on something paints a rather creative picture in my mind. I envision a stick figure clutching a handle, similar to one on a drawer. The figure’s legs are curvy and wiggly looking because of shaking with fear and the burden of the unknown. Somehow the handle would be flying around like a blown up balloon when the knot is suddenly untied. There is no stability in this image even though the figure is gripping the handle with two hands.

One perspective of getting a handle on end-of-life issues is that it is a lot easier said than done. There are a lot of variables and changes during life and preparing for the end may seem ridiculous to some, but not for the young woman who attended the seminar. She (how about you?) wanted to learn before a health crisis. I was inspired by this woman who is willing to address the topic of dying well before the need arises in her personal life...again.

To get a handle on it...let’s think about this for a minute. A handle is a tool used to stabilize or to grip onto for a specific purpose. For example, drawers have handles so we can easily open or close them. A handle allows an object to be grasped and used with a purpose in mind. Most handles are helpful and functional in their design, but in the long run, a handle simply needs to be secured to an object so when it is pulled on (utilized) it works for us.

That said, people sometimes use the phrase, “get a grip” or “get a handle on it” to dismiss or minimize an important process. A well-meaning person can use these phrases out of impatience or insensitivity. The message can be that you need to settle down... stop grieving...move on for goodness sake! Have you heard this from someone or from that voice inside of your own head? Your desire to get a handle on end-of-life concerns will make some people uncomfortable.

So, why would you take the time to get a handle on it?

Purposely inquiring about end of life issues can help secure your handle onto the drawer of life and death. Information can help calm the nerves and let you have some time to process before you are in the “have to” mode.

I'm a big fan of talking about your perspectives. When I actually get to hear your words, your perceptions and thoughts become word pictures and begin to clarify what you want and need. As private thoughts are described, a more personalized plan of care can be set in motion. This personalized plan is one way to care for your dignity, and caring for dignity is one of the most beautiful and life-changing treatments you will ever receive or offer to someone else.

One way to get a handle on determining and carrying out individualized care is to form a team. The team can be the classic: the doctor's office and hospice professionals, but don't limit yourself. Who else should be included on your team? What about neighbors, friends, family, Grief Digest Magazine articles or books? We all can find help in different and unique ways. The key is to ask your questions and vocalize your thoughts to all of your team members.

By sharing your thoughts or wishes you are grabbing on to the handle that provides some connection or security and at least the beginning of a plan of action. Perhaps getting a handle on end-of-life topics will simply allow you to make the choices you want and not have to wake up startled after a crisis.

It is true; life cannot be controlled as easily as grabbing a handle on a drawer and opening it up to get what we want. Getting a handle may mean taking an opportunity to learn about choices in a non-crisis frame of mind. A friend who has experienced many losses said, “I like the thought about taking time to process before you are in the 'have to' mode. I think things often change.....when you're in the 'have-to' situation, the cards aren't always exactly the same as when things are theoretical, but the fact of having thought of it before makes it all a bit more familiar.”

A handle can come in the fashion of words, nature, faith, people and countless other surprises. Part of your role in getting a handle will be to use your hands, eyes or heart to grab a hold of “it” when it comes your way. I want for your handle to help provide stability so you can face end-of-life issues while holding on to something that is secure.

What is available to help you get a handle on dying or death? Grief Digest Magazine is a perfect “handle.” These articles and books are here for you to grab onto with all your strength...right now. Gripping on to a few words of hope or direction can allow you to place your foot on one more stepping stone closer to the quality of life you are looking for.

Just like the woman who said she came to a Lunch and Learn to get a handle on ways to prepare for the future care of an aging parent, you can be proactive in discovering ways to get a handle on end-of-life questions now.

Jackie J. Bates has a passion to educate the community about end-of-life care and helping protect people's dignity during the dying process. She has walked with hundreds of families through the precious end-of-life journey. She is the author of "Conversations: Living Through the Process of Dying."