



Three Questions for Maria Olex

Supporting Each Other Through Grief and Loss

Transformational Times Editorial Board member Wendy Peltier interviews Maria Olex, a Clinical Health Psychologist on the Froedtert & the Medical College of Wisconsin Palliative Care Team about her thoughts on supporting patients, families and colleagues experiencing grief and loss during the holiday season ...

Transformational Times: Tell us a bit about yourself, your current role and what led you to join the Froedtert & MCW Palliative Care Team?

Hi there! My name is Maria Olex. I am a Clinical Health Psychologist on the Froedtert & MCW inpatient Palliative Care team. I am originally from the Chicagoland area. I initially came to Milwaukee for my residency in 2018, at which time I had the opportunity to work with the Palliative Care team. I then went on to complete my fellowship at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, MI where I was working with the cancer team helping patients adjust to and cope with their illness. The resiliency of patients is what makes this work rewarding and never ceases to amaze me. That said, the philosophy and approach of palliative is what led me to pursue a career within this field. I view my role as two-fold, helping patients and families cope with serious illness, while also supporting teams through any challenges and distress that may arise. There is something very gratifying about supporting individuals as they navigate end of life—a topic that is often looked over in our society.

Transformational Times: What have you noticed about the impact of the Waukesha Holiday Parade tragedy, personally and professionally, in the past several weeks?

My heart goes out to all the victims, families, and healthcare workers involved. It's impossible to make sense of a nonsensical event contributing to the difficulty of coping with such a trauma. Personally, it's been challenging to wrap my head around *another* devastating event. I cannot speak for others in how they are thinking or feeling, but I believe what I am seeing is collective grief, coupled with anticipatory grief. Feeling helpless, powerless, worried, amongst others, along with preemptive mourning and grieving. On the other hand, I have also seen positivity – communities coming together to help one another, mourn together, and be together.

Transformational Times: Can you share some practical tips in how to support our patients, families and colleagues experiencing grief and loss during the Holiday Season?

Grieving the loss of a loved one can be challenging during any time of the year but the holiday season can make it exceptionally challenging, as this is a time that is often joyous and spent with family and friends. It is important to remember that everyone grieves in different ways. There is no one size fits all when it comes to this, so do what feels right for you. On the same note, there is no right or wrong way to celebrate the holiday season after the death of a loved one.

Here are some practical tips for those grieving:

- Acknowledging that the holidays may be difficult
- Accept feelings and to stay in tune with your needs
- Let others know what you need or what feels like too much – have a friend on standby
- Plan ahead – sometimes the anticipation around the holidays is worse than the actual holiday itself
- Stick to normal routines
- Get exercise – even if it is a short walk
- Get enough sleep
- Eat and drink in moderation – don't drink alcohol if you are feeling down
- Take time for yourself, but don't isolate
- Set realistic expectations
- Create a new tradition or ritual that accommodates your current situation

Remember to take care of yourself this holiday season. If you are struggling – you are not alone. You can also seek additional support through a mental health professional.