

Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

September 2020

"Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."
- Earl Grollman

St. Luke's Hospice

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Many people could make the claim that they know who they are. They can tell you what they like, what they dislike, how they organize and live their daily lives. There are parts of ourselves we feel confident in and an individual life we have built around being that person. This is our sense of self.

In the world we're in today, it can feel like everything around us changed overnight. Many are grieving, not just loved ones but also the life and patterns they had before the pandemic. Expectations of what comes next might feel particularly uncertain. Grief and change can send that sense of self into a tailspin. Many people experience brain fog, exhaustion, lack of focus, confusion, disorientation, and several mental and physical symptoms when in a state of grief and/or sudden change.

The good news is that these responses are not just perfectly normal and commonly experienced, but they are also a sign that your brain is functioning the way it is made to. In day to day life, the same parts and chemicals in our brains that are responsible for processing emotions also directly impact memory, learning, organization, and the ability to retain new information. When grieving enters the picture, a flood of neurochemicals and hormones change rapidly in our brains, sometimes making it hard to engage with the world fully. Sleep loss, spikes in feelings of anxiety, and a general feeling of having the rug pulled out from under you are common side effects of these changes. Your brain function goes into overdrive to survive and function. Our sense of our selves can also be disrupted.

All of the behaviors and neurological patterns we use in our lives were built within a world that didn't include grief or massive change. When grief shatters that world, our brain requires time to build new patterns and to rewire the new information it is taking in. Our brain is prioritizing processing emotions over other functions, such as remembering car keys or keeping track of time. It is adapting and it will take time.

So if these feelings are normal, how can we cope with them? One the best things we can do for ourselves is to engage with our self-compassion. If car keys are forgotten or if we feel like we cannot work as fast as we used to, embrace that your brain is prioritizing other things and that it's working hard for you in other ways. Our sense of self was built in a different version of our lives. Healing does not have a timeline or a fast forward button.

Alexandra K. Becker

When You're Not Feeling Like Yourself

When our sense of self and our abilities are disrupted by grief, it can be hard to feel connected with ourselves. Below are a few ways you can increase self compassion and help with brain functioning during grief:

Increase mindfulness activities. Meditation usually stirs up images of a person sitting in silence. While this might be a perfect meditation for some, others might prefer to engage with their own moving mindfulness practice. To be mindful is simply to become more aware of ourselves and what is happening moment to moment. Moving meditations focus on using the tasks we engage in as opportunities to observe ourselves and notice both the sensory and internal experience we're having. Notice the sound of leaves when walking in the woods or how it feels when we sit in our favorite chair. These simple observations can help bring us away from overwhelming feelings and focus on the things happening in real time. This can help reduce stress and increase moments of calm in times of chaos.

Practice self compassion on purpose. Self compassion is giving the same love to ourselves that we would give to others. Challenge the voice in your head that says unkind things about yourself. Make a deliberate effort to focus on the victories you manage throughout the day. In grief, getting by can count as a victory. Try not to minimize the fact that getting by is an accomplishment sometimes.

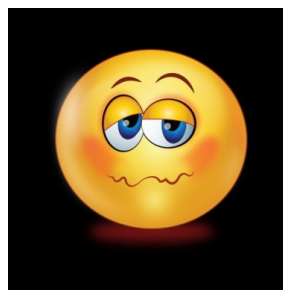
Step away from spreading yourself too thin. This is a great time to carve out space for your self. This doesn't have to mean time alone, although it could if that is something that you crave to feel refreshed. It can simply mean taking deliberate effort to only add things to your plate that feel directly in service to you and how you want to feel. Reduce the stressors and things that make you feel like you have to function like you did before your grief to decrease self critical feelings and impatience with your own process.

Express yourself in nonverbal ways: Finding new ways to engage with your emotions and allowing your feelings to come forward can reduce stress. Things like drawing, writing, painting and singing are some examples. Engaging with something tactile to stimulate the senses can help you feel more in tune with your feelings day to day and when you need to give yourself a little more love.

Move your body: Your brain tells your body what to do and is responsible for sending signals to your muscles and organs all day long. During grief, it's not uncommon for individuals to experience new physical discomforts and aching feelings. While this should always be under the guidance of your doctor, finding way to move your body can help your brain function.

Sleep. When stress and grief send our hormones out of whack, a lot of people struggle with getting the right amount of sleep. There is no magic number of how many hours of sleep you need or how you should get this sleep (i.e. sleeping through the night or taking lots of small naps as needed) but listening to what your body is asking for is critical for your brain health. During grief, you may need 10+hours of sleep a night or crave little naps four times a day. Increasing awareness of your sleep patterns and giving your brain that time to turn off and reset is important for its best functioning.

Explore supports that are available. Research has shown that engaging with people we feel connected with and close to can increase brain function We are deeply social creatures. In a time of social distancing, this can be particularly challenging. Try calling a friend or look into engaging with virtual support groups to meet this need.



Support for These Times

Our in-person support groups and workshops are on hold as we comply with CDC and Pennsylvania state guidelines. Online support is still available.

Individual support: Our three grief counselors are available by cell phone for phone calls and video chats to provide support and information to you. Our names and cell phone numbers are listed on page 1 of this newsletter.

Video Library: Coming to our web site soon is a library of resources that you will soon be able to view from the comfort of your home. These videos provide information about the grieving and mourning process and ways to care for yourself during these tender times.

Drop-In Groups: These groups enable participants the chance to receive and provide support in a collaborative environment. All groups are facilitated by a grief counselor.

The Brodheadsville group meets on the third Tuesday of the month from 1:30-3:00 pm at the Western Pocono Community Library, 131 Pilgrim Way, Brodheadsville 18322. Until we're able to meet indoors, we'll gather outside in the garden beside the building. Look for the tent and chairs. All participants must wear a mask and maintain physical distancing. For more information, contact Jean Francis at (484) 225-9269 and if the weather looks threatening, call (484) 526-2514 and listen for an update on this phone line.

Two online general grief groups are offered each month — on the first Monday of the month from 4-5:30 p.m. (contact Tara George) and on the second Tuesday of the month from 2-3:30 p.m. (contact Alexandra Becker).

In Lieu of Flowers

by *Shawna Lemay*

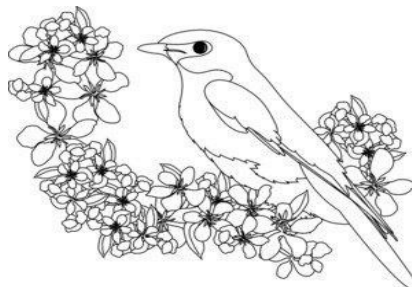
Although I love flowers very much, I won't see them when I'm gone. So in lieu of flowers, buy a book of poetry written by someone still alive, sit outside with a cup of tea, a glass of wine, and read it out loud, by yourself or to someone, or silently. Spend some time with a single flower. A rose maybe. Smell it, touch the petals. Really look at it.

Drink a nice bottle of wine with someone you love. Or champagne. And think of what John Maynard Keynes said, "My only regret in life is that I did not drink more champagne." Recall what Dom Perignon said when he first tasted the stuff: "Come quickly! I am tasting stars!"

Take out a paint set and lay down some colors. Watch birds. Common sparrows are fine. Pigeons, too. Geese are nice. Robins. In lieu of flowers, walk in the trees and watch the light fall into it. Eat an apple, a really nice big one. I hope it's crisp.

Have a long soak in the bathtub with candles, maybe some rose petals. Sit on the front stoop and watch the clouds. Have a dish of strawberry ice cream in my name. If it's winter, have a cup of hot chocolate outside for me. If it's summer, a big glass of ice water. If it's autumn, collect some leaves and press them in a book you love. I'd like that.

Sit and look out a window and write down what you see. Write some other things down. In lieu of flowers, I would wish for you to flower. I would wish for you to blossom, to open, to be beautiful.



Additional Places to Find Support and Share Your Story

Below is a list of free bereavement services in the area. Because of physical distancing, many of these resources can only be accessed online. Please contact our bereavement department at 484-526-2499 if you are in need of additional resources.

Adult Support Information

Bradbury Sullivan LGBT Community Center at 522 W. Maple Street, Allentown 18101 offers a professionally led monthly bereavement support group for LGBT people who have experienced loss. The group meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month from 5:30-7:00 pm. Please register with Ariel@bradburysullivancenter.org.

The Compassionate Friends offers ongoing support groups for parents, grandparents and adult siblings grieving the loss of a child, grandchild or sibling. Visit their website at www.thecompassionatefriends.org or contact these local chapters: Lehigh Valley chapter (484-891-0823), Carbon County chapter (484-719-6753), Easton chapter (call Bailey Benner at 610-515-3526) and Quakertown chapter (484-408-7314).

Doylestown Hospital Hospice offers a variety of support groups and programs that change seasonally. Visit www.dhospice.com or call 215-345-2079.

Gentle Yoga for Grief, Stress and Life Transitions is offered by Wendy Littner Thompson, M.Ed., LPC, RYT. Please contact her at 610-730-1992 or visit her website at www.givinggriefavoice.com to learn more. Please be sure to let her know if your loved one was a St. Luke's Hospice patient.

Grief Share is a faith-based grief support group program offered at many locations in the Lehigh Valley. There is a Grief Share program on Sundays from 2:30-4:30 p.m. at the Mt. Eaton Church in Saylorsburg, 18353. Call (570) 992-7050 for additional information. For other Grief Share locations throughout the area, visit their web site — www.griefshare.org — and enter your zip code to find the location of a group near you.

Grand View Hospital Hospice offers many groups and services that change seasonally. Please call 215-453-4210 for more information.

GRASP is for families whom have experienced death due to substance abuse. The daytime support group meets at the First Presbyterian Church in Allentown, room 118 on the first Monday of the month at 12 noon. Please register with Jenny Kemps at 610-422-8490 or email jenkemps@ptd.net. The evening support group meets on the third Monday of the month from 7-8:30 pm. Please register with Nancy Howe at 484-788-9440 or email nancyhowe@ymail.com.

HALOS – CLC (Hope After a Loved One's Suicide – Child Loss Chapter) is for parents, grandparents and adult siblings who have experienced loss of a child or sibling to suicide. The group meets on the 4th Thursday of the month from 6:30– 8:30 pm at Hughes Library in Stroudsburg, PA. Call to register with Alice Keyes at 570-236-1168 or email at alicekeys00@gmail.com.

Lehigh Valley Health Network offers many groups and services that change seasonally. Please call 610-402-7481 for more information.

Lehigh Valley Home Care & Hospice Pocono's bereavement support group meets on the first and third Wednesdays of the month from 12 noon-1 p.m. Anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one is invited to attend. The support group meets at 502 VNA Road, Route 447, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301. Please call Tammy Hiestand at 272-762-3826 to learn more.

Suicide: The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has excellent information on risk factors, statistics, education and local services. Visit their web site at www.afsp.org and enter your zip code to find the chapter nearest you. All chapters are run by people who have experienced the suicide of a loved one.

Support Information for Children

Lehigh Valley Health Network offers “Stepping Stones for Children” for ages 6 through 17. This is a combination of education, activities and support to help facilitate healthy grieving with others who are the same age. Please call 610-402-7481 to register. The group meets at 2024 Lehigh Street, Allentown, PA 18103.

Support Information in New Jersey

Karen Ann Quinlan Hospice 800-882-1117 www.karenannquinlanhospice.org/services/bereavement