

Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

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Tears shed for another person are not a sign of weakness. They are a sign of a pure heart.
~ José N. Harris

St. Luke's Hospice

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PLEASE NOTE: If you would like to be added or removed from our mailing list, or if you would prefer to receive an electronic copy, please contact Dawn at 484-526-2499.

In the last decade, we have witnessed the increase in popularity of the social and psychological phenomenon called “online mourning,” which provides ways for people to publically mourn loved ones who have died. It now includes more than Facebook and Twitter condolences. There are websites that offer anything from online memorial services, where invited loved ones can post photos and memories of the deceased, to software that despite physical death keeps you “digitally alive.”

So what are the implications of this very public way of managing the grieving process? Online mourning has some benefits in that it allows people an avenue to express their pain of grief. This may be particularly beneficial to those who lack support or are uncomfortable revealing the depths of their pain to those closest to them. The internet also provides a connection to others who have experienced similar losses such as women who have suffered a miscarriage or people whose loved ones died by suicide. The internet provides practical information on managing life when someone you relied on has died. And of course because the internet is accessible 24/7, you have access any time you need it, which can reduce the isolation that grief often creates.

That's not to say there isn't a dark side to online mourning. Messages and tributes can pour in from people who only casually knew or never knew the deceased. This can be particularly off-putting to the griever. Online mourning can also become a source of conflict. It's easier to say things online than in person so words can cause grievers additional pain. Despite social media's popularity, it hasn't led to a culture that's more sensitive to the multitude of feelings that death produces. One thoughtless comment can cause upset and leave feelings ruffled for months or even years. And because so much of what is posted has a very long life, digital encounters with someone who has died are becoming a more common experience.

If you decide to venture into online mourning, read some of the take-away tips on the next page. As with any avenue of self-expression, it pays to proceed with caution.

Jean

If You Choose the Internet as a Place to Mourn...

1. Explore journaling. Journaling is a private forum to release feelings and gain insight. It's a useful idea to journal first before going online and posting. Why? Journaling takes off the emotional 'charge' from your feelings and in doing so, it's more likely you will be posting from a calm place instead of later regretting what you posted. You may discover that journaling brings you useful revelations about your grief that you can then share online with others.

2. Adopt a delayed response policy. If you decide that you're going to post something about your deceased loved one on social media, don't post when your feelings are raw and confusing. Keep in mind that in many cases what you post will become permanent and be on the internet for years if not decades to come.

3. Write down what you plan to post. After writing down what you want to say, step away and leave your words for a few hours or days. Then go back to what you wrote and ask if this is *really* what you want to say. Are you showing your respect for the deceased or seeking digital attention? Will your words be something that supports others?

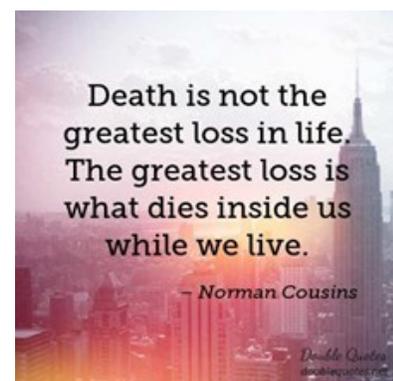
4. Don't let online communication add to your stress. Mourning is a long process with many ups and downs. The last thing you need is unnecessary conflict with strangers. If at any time you feel stressed by comments or responses in either a grief forum or Facebook page, shut the computer down and walk away. You get to decide if you want to remove your membership to a particular forum or block others from your Facebook page. Mourning is the time to be self-protective as well as self-reflective.

5. Don't overdo it. Connection and being understood are wonderful things, but like all good things they can be used incorrectly and become addictive. Addictive behavior doesn't help

us heal. Instead it stops us from dealing with the situation at hand. If you're spending all of your time posting and messaging others online about your loved one and your sorrow, ask yourself if this activity is really helping you move through grief or causing you to pine for your former life. Have you become too attached to feeling part of whatever group you're in?

6. Don't ignore support available in real time. Online support can be useful, but it can't hug you or give you a shoulder to cry on, and it rarely translates into a long term connection. So don't let online support distract you so much that you ignore real time support. Your partner might not understand exactly what you're going through, but it's likely he or she really wants to be there for you. Other family members or children might be mourning and need your support more than you realized.

7. Don't mistake online groups for the help of a professional. Mourning with others is important and a big part of the healing process, but support from others who are going through what you are is not the same as support from a professional. If you feel your grief is not lessening or that it has triggered other losses from your past, it might be time to call a grief counselor or a therapist who is trained in helping people reconcile loss.



Pros and Cons of Attending Groups

Often when we are navigating life after the death of a loved one, we need support. Family and friends often provide this support, but this task can be overwhelming if they are grieving the death of the same person as well. Unless friends or family have experienced the loss of a similar relationship, they may not be equipped to fully understand the emotions and difficulties you are encountering. That's where support groups come in.

Support groups offer companionship and understanding from others who have experienced a similar loss and the challenges that grief brings. One of the best things that happens while attending a group is the affirmation that you are not alone. Although no two people experience grief in the same way, you will find others who have experienced feelings, hurts and struggles that may resonate with you. There is also an unspoken rule that you never need to apologize for tears or other displays of emotions in these groups. Members simply "get it."

Some group members who are farther along in the grief journey may have insight and ideas that are encouraging to you. They may share traditions and ideas that you can adapt to keep your loved one present in your heart and memory. They may also provide understanding about how children and other family members have responded to the loss of the person who has died.

Of course groups are not for everyone. It may be overwhelming to be in the presence of someone else's sadness, anger, regret or guilt. And while we expect that we are in a nonjudgmental environment, there can be negativity, insensitivity and comparisons. That's why all support groups at St. Luke's Hospice are overseen by an experienced grief counselor. Our goal is to create a safe and welcoming environment where you can feel supported and re-discover hope for your future. If you have never attended such a group, consider how you may benefit from this extra layer of compassionate support.

Drop-In Groups

Drop-In Groups enable you the chance to receive and provide support in a collaborative environment. Groups are facilitated by a grief counselor and participants are invited to suggest topics for discussion. No registration is needed, hence the name "drop-in." You are invited to meet others and explore the struggles and challenges often faced after the death of a loved one. Here are the locations for our current drop-in groups:

Easton: First Monday of every month from 4-5:30 pm at St. Luke's Anderson Hospital Campus, 1872 St. Luke's Blvd, Easton, 18045. Meeting are held in the Medical Office building, lower level conference room A. For more information, contact Tara George at (484) 526-2314.

Quakertown: Second Monday of every month from 6-7:30 pm at St. Luke's Quakertown Hospital Campus, 1021 Park Avenue, Quakertown, 18951 in the cafeteria conference room (lower level of the hospital). For more information, contact Jean Francis (484) 526-2514.

Brodheadsville: Third Tuesday of the month from 1:30-3 pm at the Western Pocono Community Library, 131 Pilgrim Way, Brodheadsville 18322. For directions or more information, contact Jean Francis at (484) 526-2514.



Additional Places to Find Support and Share Your Story

This is a list of free bereavement services in the area. Please call the bereavement office at 484-526-2499 if you are in need of something more or for referrals to other services.

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 610-513526) 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.

Virtual Grief Support is offered by Dr. Don Eisenhauer. Don has a background in counseling and pastoral ministry and runs monthly tele-grief groups and chat room support. Participants either dial in via phone or log in via computer to share with other grievers. For more information about the dates and times of these opportunities, contact Don at onlinegriefcommunity@gmail.com.

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