

Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

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Self compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others.
- Christopher Germes

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Let's talk mental health. The words "mental health" are loaded, right? Individuals may think that the words do not apply to them and that they signify a "problem" that other people have. The statistics may surprise you. The majority of individuals in the United States will experience anxiety or depression during a lifetime. If you have experienced either anxiety or depression, you are not alone. And grief may make those symptoms feel like an even bigger load.

The good news is that symptoms of anxiety and depression have been recognized since at least 1600 BC, which is the earliest reference that we know of. The Eber Papyrus (1600 BC), with its origin in ancient Egypt, is the oldest medical document to contain references to what we know as depression today. The bad news is that throughout history, many negative words have been associated with anxiety and depression. In the 19th century, people talked about "nervous diseases" and specifically "hysteria" to describe symptoms of anxiety and depression. In both ancient Egypt and the 19th century, symptoms of anxiety and depression were seen as something that women mostly faced. It was not that men could not have these symptoms, it was that women were seen as the most likely "victims."

What we know now is that everyone can experience symptoms of anxiety and depression. The symptoms do not discriminate and are very common. So let's talk about anxiety and depression *and* grief. This is the thing about grief: when we experience the death of someone we love, it throws our brain for a loop. The death may shake up our entire world view. Before the death, we knew what to expect from ourselves, we knew what it meant for us to feel our highest of highs and lowest of lows. Then the death occurs. Now we are tested as this is something that we have not experienced before. We have a range of feelings that we have never experienced and we may not know what to do with these feelings. Many times people want to crawl in a ball and cocoon or keep as busy as possible. Both are coping strategies. Some think that the grief that they are experiencing is going to cause them to go over the edge and "go crazy" because they feel overwhelmed.

It is a fact that our bodies and our brains are finely tuned machines and know exactly how much we can take at any given time. Trust yourself, your brain and your body. Slow and steady. In this newsletter, we are going to give you some tangible tips to manage what you can when you are feeling out of control.

Tara George

When You Are Feeling Out of Control

The following are some tangible tips and ideas if you are dealing with symptoms of anxiety and depression:

Be aware of what you are putting in your body. We all rely on comfort foods sometimes, but what we are talking about here is a consistency of diet. There is research on how what we put in our bodies impacts us directly in how we feel in our minds. This further reinforces the point that our bodies and minds are interconnected like yin and yang. Just like a health coach at St. Luke's once told me, focus on eating natural foods such as whole grains, vegetables and fruits. A popular restaurant is onto something in their advertising campaign when they talk about clean eating. Avoid processed foods as much as possible. And guess what? Healthy eating does not have to be expensive. Did you know that frozen fruits and vegetables tend to be better than fresh because they are frozen at the peak of freshness?

Exercise. Do I necessarily mean that you need to run a marathon? Absolutely not. What do we know about exercise? Exercise such as walking 30 minutes a day can have a dramatic effect on how you feel. The body has natural endorphins that are released when we exercise. These are natural chemicals that are released by the brain to lessen our experience of pain and make us feel better.

Nature. Anxiety and depression tend to make us feel isolated within ourselves. Nature reminds us that there is something bigger than ourselves out there. Nature has a calming effect, it can lower blood pressure, slow heart rate, lessen muscle tension, and make us feel less stressed in general.

Do activities that bring you joy. These are activities that you used to enjoy before your grief experience. And feel free to try new activities that you may have wanted to try, but have not gotten the chance to do so.

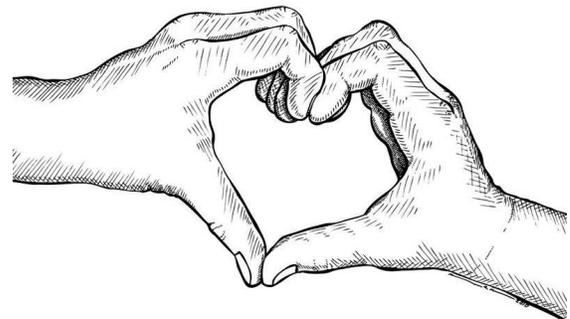
For instance, there are a lot of drawing and painting classes that are being offered online at no cost right now due to the pandemic.

Pay attention to what you're listening to. Just like being aware of what you're putting in your mouth, be aware of what you're putting in your ears. Feed yourself sounds that are relaxing to you. Did you know that listening to classical music can have a similar effect of getting out in nature, lowering blood pressure, slowing heart rate, and reducing stress? And let's be real, there's nothing wrong with a little Bon Jovi either.

Change the channel. Watch a movie or binge watch your favorite TV show. Did you know that when you watch a movie you are utilizing another part of your brain, which gives you a break from anxiety, depression and grief, even if it is only for a brief period of time?

Sleep. When you are experiencing grief, anxiety and depression, sleep can be hard to come by. Try your best to not consume too much sugar or caffeine before bed. Sometimes when we are feeling anxiety, depression and grief, we rely on sugar and caffeine to keep us going for the immediate future. Then we crash. After that, we feed ourselves sugar and caffeine again and it becomes a vicious cycle. Try to keep a healthy routine.

Practice self compassion. Self compassion is simply giving the same kindness to ourselves that we would give to others.



Meditation to Relieve Stress

Meditation has been known to reduce stress, ease anxiety, increase self-awareness, focus concentration, aid relaxation, decrease pain, and decrease blood pressure, among other positive effects.

Some people might be scared to try meditation as they feel that they might feel out of control during the practice. That is okay. Be in the feelings of being afraid or worry about feeling out of control. Acknowledge the feelings and try to work through them. If you want to give meditation a whirl, just do it to the best of your ability at the time. Like anything, with practice and repetition it will become more familiar to you, your brain, and your body.

There is a good meditation to try whether you are new to meditation or have often practiced it. It's called a Body Scan Meditation. There are many versions out there, but they all aim to have the same effect. Body Scan Meditation involves paying attention to your entire body from your toes to the tip of your head, recognizing any stress that you are holding in different areas of your body, and working to let that stress go for the time being, as you able.

Here is a short script that will give you an idea of what we are talking about. Feel free to explore on-line resources to find other scripts that might suit you. Many have an audio track with someone narrating the meditation for you and many come with relaxing music. We can all use a little relaxing music in our lives! The following is one that I like because it is simple and easy. It is a nice introduction to the practice of meditation.

Body Scan Meditation

Allow yourself a minimum of 10 minutes for meditation. As you become more comfortable with this practice, you can go for longer periods of time.

You can choose to lie down or sit up. Just be comfortable. Close your eyes. Start by bringing awareness to your body as you breath in and out. Notice where your body touches the floor or the chair. Be aware of where your body is in your space. Take as much time as you need to get a good feeling of where you are and what you feel.

At some point, when you feel ready, breathe in deep and long. Pay attention to the air rushing into your lungs and the movement inside of your body.

Now start exploring your body one part or section at a time. You might start at your toes, notice any sensations you feel and then, relax and let it go. Move onto the bridge of your feet, then to your ankles, shins, calves and so on. Keep focusing on individual parts of your body, all the while experiencing the sensations within each body part until you get to the top of your head.



Free Phone App

The UCLA Mindful is a free meditation app for your iOS or Android phone and it's a good place to start if you are interested in the practice of meditation. It was developed by researchers at UCLA and it includes meditations in English and Spanish. All of the meditations are between three and 19 minutes long so it's not hard to find time to practice on a daily basis. This app is a great balance of using science to inform the practice of mindfulness.

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