



# Comfort for the Grieving Heart

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Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

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*"Sleep is that golden chain that ties health and our bodies together."*

~ Thomas Dekker

## St. Luke's Hospice

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

Coping with grief isn't easy. In addition to the emotional, cognitive and spiritual upheaval you may be experiencing, there are a myriad of physical side effects as well. Sleeplessness is one of the most frustrating symptoms that occurs after the death of someone you loved. When you are sleepy but can't fall asleep, it adds insult to injury. While insomnia is considered a common grief reaction, sleeplessness should not be ignored.

Good sleep often suffers following a death because the griever has so many thoughts and memories about the person who died. A griever may experience distressing thoughts about how their loved one died or feelings of guilt, regret, worry, fear and sadness about the future. If you have lost a partner or spouse, your empty bed will no doubt be a constant reminder of this loss. It can be especially heart-breaking to sleep without your bed partner or to awaken and realize that they are not there. Even if your loved one did not share a bed with you, the death of a loved one often impacts sleep.

When grieving individuals don't get adequate and restful sleep on a regular basis, they exist in a constant state of sleep deprivation. Being sleep deprived worsens the intensity of grief symptoms and makes life more challenging to manage. Sleep deprivation impacts the brain's ability to process memories and it also affects judgment, so you may become more forgetful, less able to retain new information and more likely to make poor decisions. Emotionally, you may have a harder time balancing your moods, which can increase stress hormone levels as well as anxiety. And finally, sleep deprivation impacts you physically. The immune system is compromised, making you more prone to illness. In the long run, sleep deprivation has been linked to cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity.

Simply put, the lack of sleep makes us feel worse and results in a poor outcome. If you are experiencing grief and sleep loss, there are fortunately a number of things you can do to improve your "sleep hygiene" and invite slumber. It may take some time for restful sleep to return, but the actions on the next page may get you there quicker. Your sleep is important to your healing, not only physically, but also emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

### Simple Suggestions to Improve Your Sleep

Developing and practicing healthy sleep habits will make the difference between restful slumber and restlessness. Researchers have identified several practices and habits known as “sleep hygiene” to help maximize the hours people spend sleeping, even those whose sleep is affected by grief. Here are some tips from the Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School to make sleep a nightly reality:

**1. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and other chemicals that interfere with sleep.** Caffeinated products decrease the quality of sleep. Caffeine is a stimulant and it’s in coffee, tea, chocolate, cola and even some pain relievers. Avoid caffeine four to six hours before bedtime. Similarly, smokers should refrain from using tobacco products too close to bedtime. Although alcohol may initially make you sleepy, it decreases the quality of sleep once your body begins to metabolize it.

**2. Turn the bedroom into a sleep inducing environment.** Why do bats congregate in dark caves for daytime sleep? Because a quiet, dark and cool place promotes sound slumber. To achieve this effect in your bedroom, use earplugs or a “white noise” appliance to block outside noise and traffic. Use heavy curtains, blackout shades or an eye mask to block out light. Keep the room temperature comfortably cool—between 60 and 68 degrees—and make sure your bed has a comfortable mattress and pillows. Most mattresses need to be replaced within 10 years. Remove computers, TVs and work materials from the bedroom so that you train your brain to associate the bedroom with sleep.

**3. Establish a soothing pre-sleep routine.** Ease the transition from wake time to sleep time with a period of relaxing activity an hour or so before bedtime. Take a bath, read a book or practice relaxation exercises. Avoid stressful or stimulating activities such as doing work or having emotional discussions. Physically and psychologically stressful activities can cause your body to secrete cortisol which increases alertness.

**4. Don’t be a clock-watcher.** Staring at the bedroom clock when you’re trying to fall asleep increases stress and makes it harder to fall asleep. Turn the clock face away from you. If you should wake in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep after 20 minutes, get up and engage in a quiet, restful activity such as reading or listening to music. Keep the lights dim during this time as bright light will stimulate your internal clock. When your eyelids begin to droop, return to bed.

**5. Keep a consistent sleep schedule.** Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day sets the body’s internal clock to expect sleep at a certain time each night. Try to stick as closely as possible to your routine on weekends to avoid a Monday morning sleep hangover.

**6. Lighten the evening meal.** Eating a pepperoni pizza at 10 p.m. can be a recipe for insomnia. Finish dinner several hours before bedtime and avoid foods that cause indigestion. If you get hungry before bedtime, have a light snack such as a carbohydrate.

**7. Balance fluid intake.** Drink enough fluid in the evening to keep from waking up thirsty, but not so much and so close to bedtime that you will be awakened by the need to visit the bathroom.

**8. Exercise early in the day.** Exercise can help with sleep disturbances. A walk will expose you to natural light, which will contribute to a healthy sleep cycle. Get regular exercise but finish exercising at least three hours before bedtime.

**9. Nap early or not at all.** Many people make naps a regular part of their day. But if you have difficulty falling or staying asleep, afternoon napping may be one of the culprits. If you must nap, keep it short and do it before 5 p.m.



### Grief Support for You

St. Luke's Hospice abides by CDC and Pennsylvania Department of Health guidelines for public gatherings during these challenging times. All support groups and workshops continue to be held virtually. Here are support options we currently offer:

**Individual support:** Our bereavement counselors provide support and information [through video and telephone counseling sessions](#). Our contact information is on the front page of this newsletter.

**Good Grief Workshops:** These 90-minute workshops are offered virtually twice a month to provide you with a better understanding of what grief is, how it may affect you emotionally, physically, spiritually and psychologically, coping strategies and ways to reconcile the loss. For more information and to receive an invitation to join the meeting, call (484) 526-2499. You will be asked to download the Microsoft Teams app on your smart phone or computer. Workshop offerings include a daytime and an evening option each month:

**Monday, October 11, 2021 (2-3:30 pm) and  
Wednesday, October 27, 2021 (7-8:30 pm)**

**Tues, November 9, 2021 (1pm-2:30 pm) and  
Wednesday November 30th 6-7:30pm**

**Video library:** St. Luke's website includes a dozen short videos that provide information about the grieving and mourning process and ways to care for yourself after a loss. To view the videos, go to <https://www.slhn.org/vna> and click on the hospice heading. On the left side of the screen under the VNA heading, click on grief support. About half-way down this page, click onto the video library heading "Want to understand your grief?" Access the library by answering the question about your connection with St. Luke's Hospice (if any). Then view the videos from the comfort of your home.

### Yoga and Better Sleep

Yoga improves strength and flexibility while decreasing stress. It can also help you get better sleep, especially when you are grieving. When practiced on a daily basis, people who do yoga fall asleep faster, sleep longer and return to sleep more quickly if they awaken in the middle of the night.\*

To work yoga into your bedtime routine, try these three poses to prepare your body for sleep:

**Legs up the wall:** Lie on the ground on your back and put the back of your legs up a wall (keeping your legs straight), so that your body is in an L-shaped pose. Relax into this position, hold it for at least 30 seconds and focus on your breathing.

**Lying butterfly:** Lie on the ground on your back. Press the bottoms of your feet against each other and let your knees fall out to the sides. You can put a pillow under your knees if this pose feels too strenuous. Again, close your eyes, relax and breathe.

**Corpse pose:** Lie on the ground on your back with legs extended (you may also bend your knees if it makes your back feel more relaxed). Bring your arms to your sides, palms facing up. Close your eyes, relax your neck, throat and jaw. Breathe slowly, focusing on inhaling and exhaling.

\*From the National Sleep Foundation



## *Additional Places to Find Support and Share Your Story*

Below is a list of free bereavement services in the area. Because of the pandemic and the need for physical distancing, many resources may only be offered virtually. Please contact our bereavement department at 484-526-2499 if you need additional support.

### **Adult Support Information**

**Bradbury Sullivan LGBT Community Center** offers bereavement support for LGBT people who have experienced loss. For more information, please visit their website at [www.bradburysullivancenter.org](http://www.bradburysullivancenter.org) or email at [reilly@bradburysullivancenter.org](mailto:reilly@bradburysullivancenter.org).

**The Compassionate Friends** offers ongoing support for parents, grandparents and adult siblings grieving the loss of a child, grandchild or sibling. Visit [www.thecompassionatefriends.org](http://www.thecompassionatefriends.org). Enter your zip code to locate the local chapter and contact person near you.

**Doylestown Hospital Hospice** offers a variety of support groups and programs that change seasonally. Visit their website at [www.doylestownhealth.org/hospital/services/bereavement](http://www.doylestownhealth.org/hospital/services/bereavement) or call 215-345-2079.

**Grand View Hospital Hospice** offers groups and services that change seasonally. For more information, call 215-453-4210.

**Grief Share** is a faith-based support group offered throughout the Lehigh Valley. Visit their website at [www.griefshare.org](http://www.griefshare.org) and enter your zip code to find the contact person and program near you.

**OASIS Community Center** offers a variety of support groups to those grieving a loss due to substance related causes. Therapist-led meetings are held in-person and virtually for bereaved parents and young adults (siblings, partners, friends, etc.). Groups for bereaved youth ages 7-17 and bereaved caregivers raising bereaved children are offered in-person. For dates and times, visit [www.oasisbethlehem.org](http://www.oasisbethlehem.org), call 484-747-6825 or email at [rhonda@oasisbethlehem.org](mailto:rhonda@oasisbethlehem.org) to register.

**GRASP** (Grief Recovery After a Substance Passing) currently offers two virtual evening meetings per month, plus an afternoon meeting at the Oasis Center. Call 484-788-9440 or Call/Email at [nancyhowe@gmail.com](mailto:nancyhowe@gmail.com) or 484-788-9440 or Tim Howe at [howet60@yahoo.com](mailto:howet60@yahoo.com) or (646-401-4455).

**Lehigh Valley Health Network** offers many groups and services for adults and children between the ages of 6-17. For more information, call 610-402-7481. For information about program offerings in the Pocono area, call 272-762-3826 or email [Bryson.Boes@lvhn.org](mailto:Bryson.Boes@lvhn.org).

**Suicide Loss:** The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has excellent information on risk factors, statistics and education about suicide. Visit [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org) and enter your zip code to find the chapter/contact person near you. All chapters are run by people who have experienced the suicide of a loved one.

### **Support Information in New Jersey**

**Karen Ann Quinlan Hospice** offers support to those who are grieving the death of a loved one. For more information, call 973-948-2283 or visit [www.karenannquinlanhospice.org/services/bereavement](http://www.karenannquinlanhospice.org/services/bereavement).