



Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

"That first holiday season, hope flickered like the flame of a distant Candle. I could see the flames, yet I could not seem to get close to it. As Healing came, hope became more than a distant ray of light. It changed to a glow that could light my way." - Elisa Cole

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St. Luke's Hospice

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Grief is often compared to a river, the multitude of emotions ebbing and flowing, cresting and falling. The first holiday a person faces after the death of a loved one is akin to encountering rapids on that river.

When it comes to the holiday season, there are three types of grievers: the floaters, the mutineers and the navigators. Floaters are people who essentially abandon the oars and go with the flow, allowing others to coordinate their holidays, often caving into the pressure of others, sometimes agreeing to attend events and activities so as not to make waves. Next there are the mutineers, grievers who rebel and often want to isolate, paddling furiously upstream, wasting energy in protest. And then there are the navigators. These are grievers with an oar in the water and an eye on the water, paddling to avoid obstacles in the path, slowing down to take in the scenery and to rest.

Using this river analogy, can you identify which kind of griever are you? Whether you're a floater, a mutineer or a navigator, consider the three Cs this holiday season:

Choose: It's easy to drift into events and activities that actually increase our pain, but we don't have to go with the flow. We can make choices and decide which activities to participate in, who we want to be with, and what we want to do. One of the choices to consider is how to mark the loss of your loved one during the holidays. Finding ways to recognize and acknowledge the deceased can bring a positive focus to our grief. This may be done any number of ways—lighting a candle, offering up a prayer or giving voice to sadness.

Compromise: Each person deals with loss in their own way. When we share our thoughts and feelings, we may find the ways we're coping with loss may be different from other members in the family. We need to consider what we need, what others need and what the family needs. We may need to compromise on activities especially if there are young children in the family.

Communicate: It's important to discuss our choices with others, especially those most affected by them. Tell others what you want and need and what is NOT helpful as you attempt to balance merriment with sorrow. Unknown expectations generally go unfulfilled and lead to disappointment and hurt.

Whether you're a floater, a mutineer or a navigator during this holiday season, find time for rest. The holidays can be physically and emotionally draining when grieving. Include rest and quiet and encourage healthy eating and hydration for the entire family.

Actives for Grieving Families

For grieving children and their families, the holidays often bring more sorrow than joy. Here are a few ideas to help you navigate the difficult days and moments. The more that the children are encouraged to participate, the greater the opportunity for healing.

1. Take an empty gift box and decorate it with colorful paper, bows or a photo collage. Use color Xerox copies if you don't want to damage original photos. The box should be wrapped so that the top can be removed. Encourage family members to write down ways that the deceased was a gift to them. They may share how the person makes them feel, the things he or she did to help or support them, or something they learned from the person. Then set aside time when the family gathers to share these heartfelt reflections and include the loved one in your holiday.
2. Make a toast at a meal in honor of your loved one's memory. Encourage others to share something they admired about the person.
3. Light a special candle and place it on the dinner table. Acknowledge that this candle is lit to honor the life and legacy of your loved one.
4. A few days before the holiday, set up a small "memory table." On the table place, encourage family to display various remembrances of the deceased: a photo, a card from the deceased, or perhaps a gift or memento received from them. These memory tables are helpful because contributors do not have to say much.
5. Give a monetary gift to a charitable organization in remembrance of your loved one. Perhaps the children could collect non-perishable items for a women's shelter or a food pantry.
6. Doing something for others during the holiday season helps us feel good, takes the focus off ourselves for a short time, and enables us to appreciate the blessings that are still present in our lives. Consider donating your time for someone or some organization.

Choice and Changes

When it comes to the holidays, don't be afraid to break from tradition, especially if tradition feels too sad, lonely or painful. Consider scaling down and tweaking your plans.

Change the time. If your family normally gathers for a holiday dinner, consider getting together at a different time or place. Meet for brunch, lunch, appetizers or just desserts. Consider serving the food buffet style instead of a sit-down meal.

Change the purpose. Instead of traditional religious services, find and attend either a Blue Christmas service or a Longest Night event, a service typically held on or close to the winter solstice. These somber gatherings acknowledge that this is not necessarily a season of joy and they invite participants to meditate on the sorrows of the heart.

Change the scale: One family was divided on what to do. Some believed that decorating a Christmas tree was an important tribute to their late son and brother. Other family members saw it as disrespectful and frivolous. They talked through each point of view and decided that they would have a small tree, not situated in the formal living room but in the family room. Those who wanted to help decorate could, but those who chose not to would also be respected. By scaling down the tradition and giving choice, all were able to deal with loss in their own way.

Change the setting: One family elected to go away for the holidays. It didn't exactly feel like Christmas when they gathered at a Caribbean island, but that was the point. While grieving the loss of their father, an avid skier, a complete change of scenery allowed them to create new memories while grieving the loss of their father.

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:

Thursday, December 9th from 1-2:30pm

Wednesday, December 22nd from 6:30 – 8pm

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.

In Lieu of Flowers

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.

- Shawna Lemay

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 or email at 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. 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 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 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, call 484-747-6825 or email at 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@ymail.com or 484-788-9440 or Tim Howe at 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.

Suicide Loss: The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention has excellent information on risk factors, statistics and education about suicide. Visit 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.