

Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke's Hospice Bereavement Program

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Loneliness is now an accident or a choice. It's an uninvited & uncreated companion
—Fanny Howe

St. Luke's Hospice

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Loneliness is a universal human experience that can affect our physical and mental health. Now that the hustle and bustle of the holidays has faded, we may be left with a sense of emptiness. Happy New Year? Hardly.

Loneliness is an undesirable and hurtful emotion that can impact immune system functioning, sleep quality and put us at risk for heart disease. Because our society values individualism and self-sufficiency, it often causes us to become isolated and lonely. Rarely do people talk about feeling lonely.

“Loneliness is stigmatized” said John Cacioppo, co-author of *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connections*. “We’re more likely to deny feeling lonely, which makes no more sense than denying hunger, thirst or pain.”

We often equate loneliness to being alone which means “without other people.” The trouble is that loneliness is subjective and it’s often a consequence of losing a loved one. To sooth this uncomfortable feeling, consider embracing these three characteristics:

Awareness. Bring awareness to your unique experience of feeling lonely. Pay attention to how your body feels. Are you feeling a hollowness, heaviness or tightness? Where does this sensation originate – in your chest, throat, limbs? When you feel the sadness well up, allow yourself to cry without restraint.

Acceptance. Instinctively we prefer to flee from feelings of loneliness, immersing ourselves in sleep, television or chores and activities that allow us to feel superficially engaged in life. But none of this really works for the long haul. The aching and emptiness breaks through. Once we acknowledge our feelings and understand that they can seriously affect our mental and physical health, we can respond by strengthening connections with others.

Compassion. Remind yourself that others feel lonely, too. It’s part of the human experience that most people experience at some time, often after the death of a loved one. Just as you would show compassion to anyone who is lonely, recognize you deserve this response, too. Choose to see yourself with perspective—as you would see someone else—and recognize it is sad that you have these feelings. Then offer yourself gentleness and compassion. Doing this will help to ease your pain, open you up to possibilities of feeling connected and help you to take the necessary steps to reach out to others.

Do know that you are not alone in your loneliness. In many ways, we are all searching for those who will understand us and help fill some of the void and emptiness we feel. But the true work of grief comes in filling that lonely space from the inside out.

Combatting Loneliness

Strange as it might seem, there *are* benefits to loneliness. By feeling lonely, you're able to understand and have compassion for others who feel similarly. Feeling lonely can also be a crucial signal that your relationships are not as supportive, emotionally close or engaging as you want them to be. So loneliness offers the opportunity to pinpoint this problem and make efforts to correct it.

If you're struggling with loneliness, here are a few things to consider:

1. Don't confuse companionship with completeness. If you've lost a spouse, you may have felt that you were fortunate enough to have found your "better half." While it's a wonderful feeling in marriage, it can create a terrible void in loss. Searching for a new half or looking to plug in just about anyone that even remotely fits this description can be like trying to maneuver an 18 wheeler into a compact car parking space. It won't fit, no matter how hard you try. A relationship following loss can be a healthy and positive step as long as you recognize that a new person can never replace the person who died. Remember that you are forever changed because of this loss. Instead, recognize that companionship can be simply finding someone with similar interests to go out to meals and activities with and that it never has to progress past that point if you don't want it to.

2. Don't overdo being busy. Being busy is good to a point and it's a common response to a loss. "I'm doing okay, I'm keeping busy," people frequently say, as if the two are mutually exclusive. Like everything, moderation is the key. Busy *can* be good as long as it also includes time for rest and reflection and time to learn new routines as you learn how to live without the person who has died.

3. Notice what's been lost, but don't dwell in the what ifs or the "if only's". It's natural to yearn for a future that will never happen or the empty spot where your loved one used to sit. But as the years pass, we can't begin to rebuild our lives if we choose to live in

the land of "what ifs." We will continue to feel lonely and separated from the rest of the world if we are always measuring what "they" have and what we don't. Instead it's about creating a balance of feeling the pain arise, acknowledging it, but not allowing it to alienate us from those around us.

4. Don't spend time with people who bring you down. In loneliness there can be such an urgency to fill empty time that we cling to just about anyone. Too often, there are people who aren't good for us including those who drink too much, listen too little, are negative or bitter and only want to bring others down with them. Unfortunately you, a vulnerable griever, provide just the misery this type of company loves. Bottom line, being alone is better than being with the wrong people. Avoid spending time with those who don't further your growth.

5. Lay off social media. Social media may be the first solution that comes to mind when we're lonely because it's a quick and easy fix. However, research shows that while online networks often offer the illusion of connectedness, they actually make us feel even lonelier and more isolated from each other in our lives.

6. Don't be afraid to try something new. We are not suggesting this to grievers who are in the early days, weeks or even months following a loss. But eventually if you find that grief has become the cement shoes that keep you from moving forward, it's time to break free. Start small. Maybe there's a class you wanted to take or a club you've wanted to join. Or consider volunteering for a cause you believe in.

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.

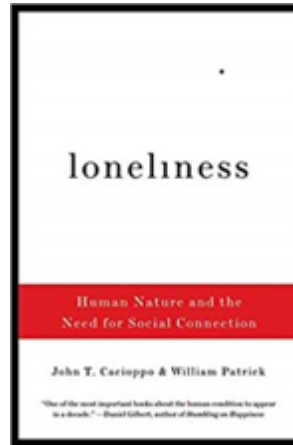
Good Grief Workshops: These 90-minute workshops are offered virtually twice a month to provide you with a better understanding of what grief is, how it may affect you emotionally, physically, spiritually and psychologically, coping strategies and ways to reconcile the loss. For more information and to 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, January 6th 2022, 1-2:30PM

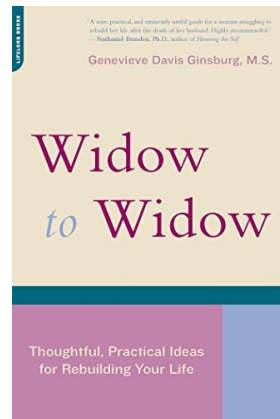
Wednesday, January 26th 2022, 6-7:30PM

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.slnh.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.

Book Reviews



If you'd like to learn more about the negative impact of loneliness on physical and mental health, consider reading *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connections* by John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick. This book was published in 2008 so you may find it at your local library. And ironically both authors lost their mothers while writing the book. Their pioneering re-search exposed the startling effects of loneliness. The authors believe that the sense of isolation or social rejection disrupts not only our thinking abilities and will power but also our immune systems,



In this remarkably useful guide, author, widow and therapist Genevieve Davis Ginsburg offers fellow widows as well as friends and family members advice for coping with the loss of a husband. From learning to travel and eating alone to creating new routines and surviving the holidays, Ginsburg gives guidance on dealing with tough emotions such as anger and guilt, handling money, maintaining family relationships and responding to offers for support. *Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life* walks readers through the challenges of widowhood and encourages them on the path to building a new life. It's not a new book so you may be able to find a copy of it at your local library.

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.

Gentle Yoga for Grief, Stress and Life Transitions is currently being offered virtually by Wendy Littner Thompson, M.Ed., LPC, RYT. Visit www.givinggriefavoices.com or call 610-730-1992. Be sure to indicate if your loved one was a St. Luke's Hospice patient.

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.