Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke’s Hospice Bereavement Program

Loneliness is not an accident or a choice. It’s an uninvited and uncreated companion. ~ Fanny Howe, American writer

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, the psychological equivalent of being a loser in life or a weak person,” 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 soothe 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.

Jean
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. Acknowledge what’s been lost, but don’t dwell in the what ifs” or the “if onlys”. 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 show 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 offline 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. It really doesn’t hurt to try, and the only thing you stand to lose is some of the loneliness that you’ve been carrying.
Support groups provide the opportunity to be with others who have experienced the loss of a loved one. Participants learn about themselves, coping techniques and ways to reconcile the loss of someone who has died.

In 2019, we’re offering two different Grief and Loss Support Groups, each group meeting for six weeks. We ask that people who register for a group commit to attending all six sessions. Register early as these groups fill up quickly.

The Parental Loss Support Group is for adults who have lost a mother or father. Parental loss is often minimized in our society since every one will one day lose a parent. This loss can be particularly marginalized when the parent who died was elderly. This group will be held on consecutive Thursday evenings from 6-8 pm beginning January 17th (January 17, 24, 31 and February 7, 14 and 21) at St. Luke’s Hospital-Allentown Campus, 1736 Hamilton Street, Allentown, 18104 in the Wieand conference room. If you would like to register, please contact Tara George at (484) 526-2413.

The Spousal Loss Support Group is for adults who have lost a spouse, partner or significant other. Losing someone we chose to unite our lives with poses specific issues of 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 research 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, and can be as damaging as obesity or smoking. A blend of biological and social science, this book demonstrates that, as individuals and as a society, we have everything to gain, and everything to lose, in how well or how poorly we manage our need for social bonds.

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 research 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, and can be as damaging as obesity or smoking. A blend of biological and social science, this book demonstrates that, as individuals and as a society, we have everything to gain, and everything to lose, in how well or how poorly we manage our need for social bonds.

Open/Drop-In Support Groups

Open/Drop-In Support Groups are designed to offer continued support to grievers who have attended grief and loss programs through St. Luke’s Hospice. These groups enable participants the opportunity to receive and provide support in a collaborative environment. Groups are facilitated by a bereavement counselor but are directed by group members in terms of topics for discussion. Currently we offer two such groups:

Easton: First Monday of every month from 4-5 pm at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, Medical Office Building, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd, Easton, 18045 in the lower level conference room A.

Quakertown: Second Monday of every month from 6-7 pm at St. Luke’s Hospital-Quakertown Campus, 1021 Park Avenue, Quakertown, 18951 in the cafeteria conference room.

Six Week Support Groups

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The Spousal Loss Support Group is for adults who have lost a spouse, partner or significant other. Losing someone we chose to unite our lives with poses specific issues of loneliness and learning new roles.

This group will be held on consecutive Tuesday evenings from 6-8 pm beginning March 5th (March 5, 12, 19, 26, April 2 and 9) at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd., Easton, 18045 (conference room A—lower level). If you would like to register, please contact Jean Francis at (484) 526-2514.
**Additional Places to Find Support and to 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**— The center offers a professionally led monthly bereavement support group for LGBT people who have experienced loss. The group meets on the 4th Wednesday of each month from 5:30-7:00 pm. Please register with Ariel@bradburysullivancenter.org.

**Doylestown Hospital Hospice** offers a variety of support groups. 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. Let her know if your loved one was a St. Luke’s Hospice patient.

**Grief Share** is a faith-based grief support group program. Several locations are provided within the Lehigh Valley. Visit www.griefshare.org to find a location 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 support group meets at the 1st 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. A second 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.

**Healing Hearts Loss, Grief and Bereavement Center** in Emmaus is offering two 6-week survivors of suicide loss support groups, one for adults and one for teens beginning Wednesday, September 5, 2018 from 6-7 pm. Please call 610-421-8625 to register. Suggested $10 donation.

**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 215-453-4210 for more information.

**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 (484-597-0240), Quakertown (267-380-0130) and Easton (610-866-5468).

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

**VNA Hospice of Monroe County** provides an adult support group to anyone who has experienced the death of a loved one within the past year. These groups are held on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of the month from 12:00 noon—1:30 pm at 502 VNA Road, Route 447, East Stroudsburg, PA 18301. Please call 570-421-5390 to learn more.

**Pocono VNA** offers a support group for those who have experienced the death of a loved one within the past 12 months. These groups are held on 2nd and 4th Wednesdays of the month at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Fish Hill Rd., Tannersville, PA 18372. The group begins at 7:00 pm. Call 570-629-1992 for more information.

**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