Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke’s Hospice Bereavement Program

June 2019

It would be impossible to estimate how much time and energy we invest in trying to fix, change and deny our emotions, especially the ones that shake us at our very core.

— Debbie Ford

This month we focus on some of the more difficult emotions that grievers often encounter after the death of someone they loved. They are the kind of feelings people often think about, but seldom disclose. One feeling is relief.

Although it’s a common emotion, people who are grieving the death of a loved one rarely admit they feel relief and consequently these unacknowledged emotions may lead to self-loathing, shame or even denial of the feeling’s existence. To harbor thoughts of relief after a death could imply that the griever is somehow a “bad” person.

Relief is experienced when intolerable conditions are at last concluded. Experiencing relief is part of being human and it often surfaces when someone dies after a prolonged illness. Some examples include the death of a spouse who had dementia or a parent with a prolonged trajectory of surgeries, treatments and relapses. Relief may be particularly strong if the griever was providing care for the person who died. Relief doesn’t mean you didn’t love the person. Quite the opposite is true. You may feel relief that their suffering has ended, which is a natural outgrowth of your love for them.

Relief may also be experienced when a sibling or a child can finally receive the needed attention they desire following the death of a family member who had a chronic illness. Visits to the hospital or nursing home have ended. Life returns to previous patterns and the focus then shifts to other members within the family.

Uncomfortable feelings don’t always make sense and they don’t have to. Feelings are neither good nor bad; they are simply part of the grieving process. Acknowledging and accepting them as part of who we are is the most courageous and responsible act we can do to heal. Turn to the next page to learn about other feelings we rarely admit we have.

Jean
**Uncomfortable Feelings**

**Envy:** Five years after the death of her 25-year-old daughter, Linda was consumed with envy when she was around her daughter’s closest friends, all who were getting married or starting families. While grievers are taught to expect a multitude of emotions, envy isn’t usually on this list. Perhaps we’ve learned that envy is one of the seven deadly sins. Envy is unhappiness that arises when we contemplate another person’s favorable status. And while we may not want to admit we’re jealous of others and their good fortune, it’s entirely normal to envy intact families or marriages. It’s a jolting reminder of what was and no longer is. Linda was being reminded that she had lost the opportunity to plan a wedding and to become grandmother.

**Idealization:** In the early months following a death, images and memories of a loved one are often enhanced. The griever may need to recall their loved one’s best attributes and the fond times shared together. It is part of our society’s culture to only speak well of the dead. After all, the deceased is not around to defend themselves. But eventually the concept of our loved one undergoes revision as the griever puts memories into perspective. If the relationship does not undergo this revision, idealization becomes an attempt to rewrite history. The loved one is elevated to sainthood and the griever may attempt to defend themselves against some of their negative feelings about the person who died. They fail to uncover the blemishes that may have been buried with the loved one.

**Survivor guilt** – This feeling was first documented after the Holocaust and since that time, researchers have recognized that survivor guilt is far more common than initially understood.

Survivor guilt can occur when someone survives an accident, an act of violence or a natural disaster when others didn’t. It may occur when a child dies before the parent or when a sibling dies after a long illness. This guilt varies dramatically from person to person in its duration and intensity. Some theorists suggest that grievers prefer to blame themselves for things outside their control or that they find it difficult to accept the reality that they are truly helpless.

**A Child’s Discomfort**

Children often confront uncomfortable feelings after a death. Eight-year-old Julie will never forget the argument she had a week before her mother died. Angry about having to wear a coat, Julie stomped off after yelling, “I hate you! I hope you die!” Months later, she told a counselor, “She’s dead because I said that.”

Children often employ magical thinking as a way to make sense of an unsettling event. They create their own explanations for the death and because children tend to be egocentric, they often create implausible theories that revolve around their actions or experiences. They imagine that something they did or didn’t do caused the death.

Magical thinking is a defense mechanism for children, a way they can face the fear of the unknown. This is why it’s so important to be honest with children when a death occurs. Tell them in age appropriate language what happened and answer their questions. Otherwise, they will fill in their own details about the death and their reality is often more frightening than the truth.
Everything changes after the death of a loved one. That includes eating habits. People who are grieving frequently report losing weight because they don’t have an appetite. It’s easier to skip a meal than to prepare one. Or they gain weight because when they are hungry, they choose convenient foods, those high in calories and fat. Or the griever doesn’t have the slightest idea how to prepare a nutritious meal because the person who died did all the meal planning and cooking.

That’s why we are introducing a new workshop called “Meals Made Simple” and we’ve enlisted the help of chef Charles DeLeva and dietitians Kate Kozak and Kim McKnight. They will provide you with ideas and demonstrate how to prepare satisfying yet simple meals in minutes without breaking the budget.

The Meals Made Simple workshop will be held at St. Luke’s Anderson campus on Wednesday, July 17 from 7-8:30 p.m. in the Medical Office Building, conference rooms A and B in the lower level. The hospital address is 1872 St. Luke’s Blvd, Easton, 18045. Register by calling Dawn Cavanaugh at (484) 526-2499. If there’s enough interest, we hope to offer this workshop at other locations.

Our Open/Drop-In Support Groups allow you the chance to receive and provide support in a collaborative environment. Groups are facilitated by a bereavement counselor while members suggest topics for discussion. Come and meet others dealing with similar challenges and emotions following a death. No registration is needed. Currently we offer two such groups and each group meets for 90 minutes:

**Easton: First Monday of every month from 4-5:30 pm** at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, 1872 St. Luke’s Blvd, Easton, 18045. The group meets in the Medical Office building in the lower level conference room A.

**Quakertown: Second Monday of every month from 6-7:30 pm** at St. Luke’s Hospital-Quakertown Campus, 1021 Park Avenue, Quakertown, 18951 in the cafeteria conference room (lower level of the hospital).

What’s Your Grief is a website to help you understand grief, an enormously complex and frustrating topic. Not only is grief an emotional, logistical and existential nightmare, it’s also taxing. It requires us to navigate the world without someone we loved, to deal with complex emotions and to figure out ways to move forward when everything seems kind of bleak. The co-authors of this site are Baltimore-based mental health professionals with 20+ years of experience in grief and bereavement. They seek to promote grief education, exploration and expression in practical and creative ways. Check out the site at https://whatsyourgrief.com.
**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. **Please note the change in meeting day.** The group now 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: Allentown chapter (call Dawn De Long at 610-837-7924), Easton chapter (call John Sabo at 610-866-5468), Lehighton chapter (call Patty Bisel at 610-826-2938) and Quakertown chapter (484-408-7314).

**Doyelstow 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. 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 the web site www.griefshare.org and enter your zip code to learn 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 Kems 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.

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

**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