Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke’s Hospice Bereavement Program

“Ahow your thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment. Look your grief in the face and say hello to it.” — Dr. Alan Wolfelt

A husband regrets that he hadn’t paid more attention when his wife told him she wasn’t feeling well. A sister believes if she’d taken her brother to a different hospital, he wouldn’t have died. A wife regrets complaining about her husband prior to his sudden cardiac arrest.

Guilt is one of the most powerful negative reactions to the loss of a loved one, only equaled by anger as a common grief experience. After someone close to us dies, we think back to the events, conversations and behavior we engaged in before the death. We examine the ways in which we might have played a role in that person’s final decline. Author Harriet Schiff once suggested if people were supposed to function with perfect hindsight, our eyeballs would be situated in the back of our heads.

It’s important to understand what guilt really is. The first definition in Webster’s dictionary states that guilt is having committed a breach of conduct, especially one that violates the law and involves a penalty. If you are struggling with feelings of guilt, ask yourself this question: Was it something you did wrong or was it something you wished you could have done differently?

These are the woulda, coulda, shoulda questions we often wrestle with when we’re grieving. Guilt is a normal response when you are grieving, but it’s not necessarily a realistic response. Why then is it such a common reaction? Either we did something wrong or we feel that we did something wrong. Or we feel guilt because we crave order in our lives.

If you’re feeling guilty, the first thing to do is to acknowledge the feeling and not allow others to talk you out of what you feel. Feelings are neither right nor wrong, they just are and it’s important to own them, name them and feel them.

Most of us berate ourselves unnecessarily and without good reason. Show yourself the same understanding and forgiveness you would show a close friend. Realize that by living within the cell block of your own guilt, you’ve created a jail for your mind. You wouldn’t think it reasonable for someone else to punish themselves in this way, so don’t give yourself permission to do it to yourself. If you allow yourself to let in the softer and kinder emotions of loss, you will find you are more open to embrace the love and positive memories that remain.

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Got Guilt?

Not only is guilt a common concern following the death of someone we loved, there are also several different types of guilt you may experience. Here are a few of the common ones:

**Survivor guilt** – Why did she die and I’m still alive? It’s a totally natural question especially if you were older or had more health concerns than a loved one. It’s an insightful question to ponder and people initially troubled by this question often find purpose or solace in the time they were granted that their loved one didn’t have.

**Relief guilt** – It’s quite natural to feel some relief after a prolonged or intense illness. But these feelings of relief can also create guilt. Relief guilt may also occur when you recognize you won’t miss certain aspects of the relationship you had. A wife admits that she’s relieved she no longer has to bathe her husband because he had dementia and became combative around water. Not missing certain aspects of the person who died is normal. It doesn’t mean you didn’t love them any less.

**Joy guilt** – When we experience happy thoughts and feelings, we may later feel guilty for having them. One day you are smiling or laughing only to scold yourself for feeling happy in the midst of your loss. It’s as if your loyalty to the person who died requires you to be sad all of the time now that they’re gone. Wrong! When you do the work required in grieving and mourning, you will experience more joy and less pain.

**Magical thinking and guilt** – Little children often participate in magical thinking. A child in a fit of anger shouts “I wish you were dead” and believes when his mother dies of a heart attack two days later that he somehow caused her to die. Wishing for the death of someone close and then having that “wish” come true can produce guilt, too. Recognize that all relationships have periods when negative thoughts prevail but our mind doesn’t have the power to inflict death.

**Long standing personality factors** – Some people feel guilty all the time because they believe they’re responsible when something bad happens. When someone dies, it’s just one more thing to feel guilty about. Whatever your unique feelings about guilt and regret, don’t let them go unexpressed. These feelings are a natural part of your experience and like all dimensions of grief, they need to be explored. Find a compassionate person who will walk alongside you and listen as you explore these feelings without judgement.

Some people are partly or totally responsible for the death of someone. If your actions either accidentally or intentionally resulted in the death of someone, do seek out professional help from an experienced counselor.

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**The Empty Chair**

When you struggle with guilt or regret, consider the empty chair technique. It’s one way to reduce anxiety while gaining perspective about past or current behavior.

The empty chair is an exercise in which you express your thoughts and feelings as if you were talking to a specific person. You direct your words and gestures at an empty chair as if that chair contained the person you need to talk to. What do you say? Say whatever comes to mind. Some people find it difficult to get started and if you have trouble imagining the person you wish to speak to is there, place their photo in the chair and start talking. As you speak your mind, you’ll likely begin to feel the way you would if you were speaking directly to that person. After you’ve said all that you need to say, you may feel a sense of relief and a better understanding of your actions and limitations as you begin to forgive yourself.
Healing Rhythms

Healing rhythms is a drumming group providing a unique approach to reconciling loss. The drum becomes the vehicle to articulate thoughts and feelings without words. Led by a Remo HealthRhythms endorsed facilitator, you will experience meditative drumming, guided imagery and inspirational readings as you discover ways to navigate loss.

There are still a few spots left for the next drumming group. It will be held on six consecutive Saturday mornings from 10am to 12noon starting November 17th (Nov 17, 24, Dec 1, 8, 15 and 22). The group will meet at Lehigh Valley Friends Meetinghouse, 4116 Bath Pike (Route 512), Bethlehem 18017. To register, please call 484-526-2499.

Coping with the Holidays

There is no right or wrong way to survive the holidays after the death of someone you loved. Understanding what you need and planning ahead enable you to cope during an emotionally charged day or season.

Workshop participants will learn strategies and coping techniques at one of our “Coping with the Holidays” workshops below. To register, please call (484) 526-2499:

**Thursday, November 8** from 6-8 p.m. at Dimmig Education Center (side A) at St. Luke’s Hospital-Allentown campus, 1736 Hamilton Street, Allentown, 18104.

**Wednesday, November 14** from 6-8 p.m. at the Priscilla Payne Education Center (Room 103) at St. Luke’s Hospital-Bethlehem campus, 801 Os trum Street, Bethlehem, 18015.

**Tuesday, November 27** from 6-8 p.m. in the lower level conference room (side A) at St. Luke’s Hospital-Anderson Campus, 1700 St. Luke’s Blvd., Easton, 18045.

Open/Drop-in 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. They are facilitated by a bereavement counselor but are directed by group members in terms of topics for discussion. Currently we offer two 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.

Service of Remembrance

Our Services of Remembrance are conducted throughout the year as a way to reflect and celebrate the lives and legacies of the people who died on St. Luke’s Hospice service. These services are interfaith in nature and enable families and hospice staff to reunite.

The next Service of Remembrance will be held on Sunday, December 2nd at 3 p.m. at Wesley United Methodist Church, 2530 Center Street in Bethlehem, PA 18015. The names of the patients who died between July 1 and October 31, 2018 will be read aloud and invitations will be mailed to families this fall.
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