Comfort for the Grieving Heart

Provided by St. Luke’s Hospice Bereavement Program

Sleep is that golden chain that ties health and our bodies together. - Thomas Dekker

Coping with grief isn’t easy. In addition to the emotional, cognitive and spiritual upheaval you may be experiencing, there are a myriad of physical side effects as well. Sleeplessness is one of the most frustrating symptoms that occurs after the death of someone you loved. When you are sleepy but can’t fall asleep, it adds insult to injury. While insomnia is considered a common grief reaction, sleeplessness should not be ignored.

Good sleep often suffers following a death because the griever has so many thoughts and memories about the person who died. A griever may experience distressing thoughts about how their loved one died or feelings of guilt, regret, worry, fear and sadness about the future. If you have lost a partner or spouse, your empty bed will no doubt be a constant reminder of this loss. It can be especially heartbreaking to sleep without them or to awaken and realize that they are not there. Even if your loved one did not share a bed with you, the death of a loved one often impacts sleep.

When grieving individuals don’t get adequate and restful sleep on a regular basis, they exist in a constant state of sleep deprivation. Being sleep-deprived worsens the intensity of grief symptoms and makes life more challenging to manage. Sleep deprivation impacts the brain’s ability to process memories and it affects judgment, so you may become more forgetful, less able to retain new information and more likely to make poor decisions. Emotionally, you may have a harder time balancing your moods, which can increase stress hormone levels and increase anxiety. And finally, sleep deprivation impacts you physically. The immune system is compromised, making you prone to illness. In the long run, sleep deprivation has been linked to cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes and obesity.

Simply put, the lack of sleep makes us feel worse and results in a poor outcome. If you are experiencing grief and sleep loss, there are fortunately a number of things you can do to improve your “sleep hygiene” and invite slumber. It may take some time for restful sleep to return, but the actions on the next page may get you there quicker. Your sleep is important to your healing, not only physically, but also emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

Jean

PLEASE NOTE: If you would like to be added or removed from our mailing list, or if you would prefer to receive an electronic copy, please contact Dawn at 484-526-2499.
Tips to Improve Sleep

Developing and practicing healthy sleep habits will make the difference between restful slumber and restlessness. Researchers have identified several practices and habits known as “sleep hygiene” to help maximize the hours people spend sleeping, even those whose sleep is affected by grief. Here are some tips from the Division of Sleep Medicine at Harvard Medical School to make sleep a nightly reality:

1. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and other chemicals that interfere with sleep. Caffeinated products decrease the quality of sleep. Caffeine is a stimulant and it’s in coffee, tea, chocolate, cola and even some pain relievers. Avoid caffeine four to six hours before bedtime. Similarly, smokers should refrain from using tobacco products too close to bedtime. Although alcohol may initially make you sleepy, it decreases the quality of sleep once your body begins to metabolize it.

2. Turn the bedroom into a sleep inducing environment. Why do bats congregate in dark caves for daytime sleep? Because a quiet, dark and cool place promotes sound slumber. To achieve this effect in your bedroom, use earplugs or a “white noise” appliance to block outside noise and traffic. Use heavy curtains, blackout shades or an eye mask to block out light. Keep the room temperature comfortably cool—between 60 and 68 degrees—and make sure your bed has a comfortable mattress and pillows. Most mattresses need to be replaced within 10 years. Remove computers, TVs and work materials from the bedroom so that you train your brain to associate the bedroom with sleep.

3. Establish a soothing pre-sleep routine. Ease the transition from wake time to sleep time with a period of relaxing activity an hour or so before bedtime. Take a bath, read a book or practice relaxation exercises. Avoid stressful or stimulating activities such as doing work or having emotional discussions. Physically and psychologically stressful activities can cause your body to secrete cortisol which increases alertness.

4. Don’t be a clock-watcher. Staring at the bedroom clock when you’re trying to fall asleep increases stress and makes it harder to fall asleep. Turn the clock face away from you. If you should wake in the middle of the night and can’t get back to sleep after 20 minutes, get up and engage in a quiet, restful activity such as reading or listening to music. Keep the lights dim during this time as bright light will stimulate your internal clock. When your eyelids begin to droop, return to bed.

5. Keep a consistent sleep schedule. Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day sets the body’s internal clock to expect sleep at a certain time each night. Try to stick as closely as possible to your routine on weekends to avoid a Monday morning sleep hangover.

6. Lighten the evening meal. Eating a pepperoni pizza at 10 p.m. can be a recipe for insomnia. Finish dinner several hours before bedtime and avoid foods that cause indigestion. If you get hungry before bedtime, have a light snack such as a carbohydrate.

7. Balance fluid intake. Drink enough fluid in the evening to keep from waking up thirsty, but not so much and so close to bedtime that you will be awakened by the need to visit the bathroom.

8. Exercise early in the day. Exercise can help with sleep disturbances. A walk will expose you to natural light, which will contribute to a healthy sleep cycle. Get regular exercise but finish exercising at least three hours before bedtime.

9. Nap early or not at all. Many people make naps a regular part of their day. But if you have difficulty falling or staying asleep, afternoon napping may be one of the culprits. If you must nap, keep it short and do it before 5 p.m.
Yoga and Better Sleep

Yoga improves strength and flexibility while decreasing stress. It can also help you sleep better, especially when you are grieving. When practiced on a daily basis, people who do yoga fall asleep faster, sleep longer and return to sleep more quickly if they awaken in the middle of the night.*

To work yoga into your bedtime routine, try these three poses to prepare your body for sleep:

**Legs up the wall:** Lie on the ground on your back and put the back of your legs up a wall (keeping your legs straight), so that your body is in an L-shaped pose. Relax into this position, hold it for at least 30 seconds and focus on your breathing.

**Lying butterfly:** Lie on the ground on your back. Press the bottoms of your feet against each other and let your knees fall out to the sides. You can put a pillow under your knees if this pose feels too strenuous. Again, close your eyes, relax and breathe.

**Corpse pose:** Lie on the ground on your back with legs extended (you may also bend your knees if it makes your back feel more relaxed). Bring your arms to your sides, palms facing up. Close your eyes, relax your neck, throat and jaw. Breathe slowly, focusing on inhaling and exhaling.

*From the National Sleep Foundation

Open/Drop-In Support Groups

Open/Drop-In Support 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.

Good Grief Workshops

Feelings and thoughts can be intense after the death of someone we loved. Grievers often wonder if they are going crazy. We offer the Good Grief Workshop to help participants understand the emotional, social, physical and spiritual impact of loss while learning to develop skills and strategies for coping with loss.

In April, we will be having two Saturday morning workshops to enable more people who work during the week to attend. To register for either workshop, please call (484) 526-2499.

**Saturday, April 6 from 10 am to 12 noon at** St. Luke’s Hospital-Quakertown Campus, 1021 Park Avenue, Quakertown, 18951 in the cafeteria conference room (lower level).

**Saturday, April 27 from 10 am to 12 noon at** Dinkey Memorial Church, 1742 Dinkey Road, Lehighton, 18212.
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.

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).

Doyles-town 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.

Good Grief Support Group meets on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays of each month at 7 p.m. at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, Fish Hill Road in Tannersville. Call (570) 629-1992 for more information.

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 state, visit the web site www.griefshare.org and enter your zip code to learn the specifics about 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 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. 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 alicek00@gmail.com.

Lehigh Valley Health Network offers many groups and services that change seasonally. Please call 215-453-4210 for more information.

Lehigh Valley Hospice 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