

Grief Services Online

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Please call (517) 882-4500 or e-mail kperry@hospiceoflansing.org if you wish to be removed from this mailing list.

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**HOSPICE OF LANSING
STONELEIGH RESIDENCE**

3411 Stoneleigh Drive
Lansing, MI 48910

Phone: (517) 882-4500

Fax: (517) 882-3010

hospiceoflansing.org

Grief MATTERS

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On The Journey



The Legend of the Lotus

Out of the depths and shadows from the bottom of a pond, the lotus emerges, untouched and unstained. Representing the purity of the mind and soul, the lotus flower is a powerful symbol of peace, hope, transcendence and rebirth. The lotus reminds us to strive through difficulties and that beauty and light can rise from the murky darkness.

The New Year is the time that we often think about transition and change. The New Year is a marker—from what has been to what is possible, a time of looking forward as well as back.

Grieving also includes looking back, remembering both the good times and the hard times. It is looking forward, in hope, claiming for ourselves the promise that we will not always feel so lost and alone in our grief. The quote below by Rilke points this out; the future holds new possibilities. There are areas to be found where growth may take place in our lives, changes we never dreamed possible. At first we may not want to even contemplate these changes and possibilities, but as the journey takes place and as time passes we may indeed

discover those “things that have never been” that will lead us into the future. It does take time and it takes work—hard work.

In this issue we discuss the challenges of grief and what grief and mourning may feel like. We all have different experiences of grief because each loss is unique. There are similarities that we may recognize, and in this recognition we know that we are not alone and this knowledge can help each of us in this process.

*“Let us look to the New Year,
to things that have never been.”*

— RAINER MARIA RILKE, GERMAN POET 1875-1926 —

Experiencing Grief

Every experience of grief is different. Everyone experiences loss; some losses are greater than others. It depends on the relationship, the age and the proximity of those we have lost.

It depends on how willing we are to work at mourning. What we know about grieving is that it is a process. Grief does not understand timelines. We also know that the intensity of grief changes over time. It may soften only to surprise us by resurgence around a special occasion. It is unreasonable to expect our grief to conform to what others may perceive as the norm, or even what we think is reasonable.

Many places of employment allow only a brief period of time for bereavement. Working in the midst of new grief can be very difficult, and we may find ourselves unable to function at work as we once were able.

Do we expect to be able to handle all that needs to be done without being slowed down and exhausted by our grief? We all have multiple roles; parenting, grand-parenting, going to school, going to work.... Do we believe that we must maintain all the activities that we once were involved in while picking up all those things that were done by our loved one? Each of us must make choices as we work through our grief. Following are sketches of different grief experiences. You may find similarities where you say, "that's where I am right now" or "I was there, once, too."

Charlie returned to work one week after his father died. That's the time period his company believed was appropriate. The first day back he

had great difficulty keeping things together. He had to catch his breath to keep invested in what he was doing.

After her husband died, Susan found she slept better by going to bed around 1:00 a.m., but that meant getting up later in the morning. She felt guilty about sleeping in.

*Each of us must
make choices as we work
through our grief.*

The first day back to work after his son died, Bill's coworkers were glad to see him—even asking him how he was doing. He soon realized that they only wanted to hear "fine" and not the truth. Instead of feeling comfortable around them, he felt he had to put on a strong, happy face. He started turning down their lunch invitations and found other coworkers who allowed him to be more honest.

Alice was so confused after her husband died. Some days she wanted a friend to come over so she could express herself to someone. Other days she really had nothing to say and was content at home being silent.

"I don't want to upset my children even though they are grown up,"

Mike kept telling himself. So instead of talking about how much he missed his wife, he would go off alone when feeling overwhelmed.

Each of these situations is different. But there is the underlying truth in all of these examples that grief impacts all of life. The right way to grieve for each of us is to do what feels right, keeping in mind that we need to take care of ourselves while we mourn.

Having a support system is one way of taking care of ourselves. A network of family and/or friends whom you can trust to share your grief with can be very helpful. Is there someone you know whom you can cry with or call in a crisis? Is there anyone you can have fun with or someone you know whom you can freely share anything and everything with—even your deepest pain?

Expressing our pain and sharing our experiences are ways that may enable us to reclaim our strength and persevere. Crying tears and crying out in our distress brings relief, if only for a few moments at a time; but as time passes, those moments do last longer. Think about those who support and encourage you, those who understand when you need a listening ear and those who recognize when you need to be alone and silent. Having others journey with us whom we can trust, share, and call on for help is a gift.

The Challenges of Grief

Often it can be difficult to find permission to grieve, both from ourselves and the outside world. You may encounter responses such as “he/she lived a good life.”

Many people mean well and want for you to feel better by reminding you of the positive things in your life or the life of your loved one. These responses may make you feel as if you should not cry, or hurt, or be angry. However, you had a relationship with your loved one that deserves to be grieved and fully experienced. Sometimes this may mean staying in bed for extra time in the morning because you don't feel like getting up to face the day. Or it may mean when someone asks you “how are you?” that you answer honestly and say “not very good”, even if it means making that person uncomfortable.

As simple as it may sound, try to allow yourself to feel what you feel and think what you think. The thoughts and feelings are there whether you want them to be or not, and the best way to work through them is to allow them to be thought and felt. Physiologically, emotions are like waves. They build and come to a crest, but as they are experienced and come to shore the emotions naturally ebb, sometimes returning later as smaller waves. As our emotions build, it can be tempting to try and stop them from cresting and being fully experienced because they seem so overwhelming. When we try to stop these waves of emotion in the middle, they can become “stuck.” Be gentle with yourself, whatever thoughts or feelings you are having allow them to be fully acknowledged. This will allow you to move through your grief.

Grief may also be helped by reviewing memories that you have of your loved one. Pictures are a wonderful way to remember. If it feels right to you, review pictures of your loved one that remind you of your favorite times with them. You may even choose to make a memory book if you have some other items like tickets, postcards, or playbills from past trips. Allow yourself to feel the emotions they evoke.

You may feel a multitude of emotions—happiness, sadness, loneliness, or even anger. These are all normal emotions when mourning the loss of someone close to you. Even though you have lost someone important to you, you have not lost the memories that you

have of that person. The love that they gave you is still with you. Reflecting back on the experiences you had together can help you heal your loss while still retaining the experiences you shared.

As you are mourning your loss, be mindful if your grief makes it difficult to provide for your basic needs, such as bathing, getting three meals a day, or other activities of daily living. This is the time when your grief needs special attention, and you may need to seek out extra help in the form of a support group or bereavement counselor. Contact your local hospital, hospice, funeral home, or community mental health organization for resources. As always, the staff at Hospice of Lansing, Ionia Area Hospice, and Stoneleigh Residence is available to help connect you with resources or provide a listening ear.

Heather Kalso
SOCIAL WORKER

Healing takes courage, and we all have courage, even if we have to dig a little to find it - Tori Amos

Hospice of Lansing, Stoneleigh Residence offers free bereavement counseling to community members as well as to families who have used our hospice service. Please call our office at (517) 882-4500 or (877) 882-4500 for more information.