

Along the Way

IU Health Hospice Bereavement Services Newsletter

Spring 2023

Resources

BOOKS:

- *The Anxiety First Aid Kit: Quick Tools for Extreme, Uncertain Times* by Rick Hanson
- *Healing After the Loss of Your Mother: A Grief & Comfort Manual* by Elaine Mallon

PHONE:

- IU Health Guided Meditation Line: 317.962.6463
- AARP Friendly Voices – Connecting people to people, especially when isolated: 888.281.0145
- Mental Health America: 800.969.6642
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline: 800.273.TALK (8255)
(Always available)



Reflecting on Mother's and Father's Day

By Holly Cedar, MDiv, BCC, Hospice Chaplain

Mother's Day and Father's Day can be difficult holidays after losing a parent or child. I know for me; all holidays are definitely different after losing my parents. Although several years have now passed since their deaths, and the pain is usually overshadowed by memories of their love—it's always hard to know how these dates will affect me. Sometimes I am surprised when the loss stings more than I expected.

We always thought my father would die first—he had some heart problems and Mom was in good health. So, all of us were shocked when she died suddenly of a massive brain aneurism. My father was devastated, surprised he was the one who had to deal with the loss of his life-long partner. In a nutshell he (and the rest of us) felt extremely unprepared.

My dad framed the poem *I Carry Your Heart with Me (I carry It In)* by E.E. Cummings found on page 2, saying it gave him great comfort. He read it over and over again after Mom died. It became a bridge to her presence and articulated how much he loved her.

The more we deal with loss in life, the more we realize how fragile life really is. We learn to not take the special moments we have with our loved ones for granted as we might have done unwittingly before, trying as best we can to cherish every single second.

We also learn that holidays or certain dates can be especially difficult. All of this is normal under usual circumstances, but when we add the pandemic on top of whatever grief we might be experiencing, we get what I learned about in seminary—complicated grief.

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Call your local IU Health Hospice office 866-272-5083

iuhealth.org/patient-family-support/support-care/bereavement

For support for loss of a child visit:

RileyChildrens.org/support-services/grief-bereavement-services

I Carry Your Heart with Me (I Carry It In)

I carry your heart with me (I carry it in my heart) I am never without it (anywhere I go you go, my dear; and whatever is done by only me is your doing, my darling)

I fear
no fate (for you are my fate, my sweet) I want no world (for beautiful you are my world, my true) and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a sun will always sing is you

here is the deepest secret nobody knows (here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud and the sky of the sky of a tree called life; which grows higher than soul can hope or mind can hide) and this is the wonder that's keeping the stars apart

I carry your heart (I carry it in my heart).

~ E.E. Cummings



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Grief is of course normal after losing someone—crying, feeling sad and angry and hardly able to keep up with life—this happens to all of us. Grief has its own unique, natural way to unfold for each individual and loss, and as long as we eventually get back to life even though we are sad, we know we are healing (albeit it is sometimes slow and confusing.)

But what happens when things complicate the grieving process? For those of us who lost loved ones during the pandemic to COVID, it is likely we were unable to see or be with them as they died at the hospital. Having something so important like this out of reach makes us feel short-changed, stinging even more than it might under “normal” circumstances.

The thing to remember is that we are all in this *together*. Many of us have lost ones dear to us this past year and have had to walk the path of “complicated grief.” Reach out to others who have been through similar losses—though this doesn’t erase the pain, it will benefit us. Yes, this past year has been unusually rough—and yet we persevere through the love that is here with us today.

Perhaps we don’t just carry our lost loved ones’ hearts “in our hearts,” but also those still here with us today. Something tells me we each have many others carrying our own hearts in their hearts as well. In carrying each other, we *receive* great comfort and *give* great comfort. Through this sharing of love, we learn to endure.

Getting Back on Your Feet after Caregiving



Losing a loved one to death starts a natural grieving process. If in addition to the death of someone you love you were that person’s caregiver, you might also feel like you lost your job and even your identity. After having your schedule centered around the needs of a sick and dying partner, parent, child, or friend, the death can leave caregivers not only grieving but also searching for how to fill their days and adjust to life again.

Your life is very different now. You’re no longer giving medications, organizing routines, and seeing the visiting nurses and other professionals who might have become part of your life. Limitations on travel, vacation, and socializing are gone. Shopping might now remind you of what you don’t need to buy anymore. You might be nervous about getting back in touch with friends who were put on hold. On top of all the changes normal grieving brings, these adjustments might add to your worry about what life will be like and what your purpose will be without the job of taking care of someone.

If you were a caregiver, it’s not unusual to have feelings others might not experience. You may have the extra burden of feeling you should have been able to handle things differently, offer better care, have been more patient, or somehow control the uncontrollable decline of your loved one.

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Feeling relief that your loved one isn't suffering anymore and that your responsibilities are over can lead to other uncomfortable feelings, such as guilt and sadness, even though the relief makes sense as few people miss having to be on call and on edge 24/7. Whatever you feel, its clear life has changed and dealing with caregiver exhaustion and grief are necessary. Moving into the next stage requires different steps for each person. It might be useful to work on letting go of any guilt. Most caregivers do their best, even though no one is a perfect caregiver. It can help to talk with others who have been caregivers to find out you did a good job after all. If certain situations are hard to let go of, some find it helpful to write the deceased person a letter of apology. Be gentle with yourself; people are often their own hardest critics. Remember you were tired and did the best you could at the time. Focus on positive memories of your relationship with your loved one and try to let go of any negative feelings.

Thinking about how to re-join the world.

Once you feel relief from the intense early grief and life becomes more manageable, you may consider reaching out to friends and your support systems as a start. Volunteering is also a way to step back in. Remember what and who brought you joy and fulfillment before caregiving and then re-engage with those activities and people. You may ask yourself the following questions as you think about your future:



- What did I have to set aside while taking care of my loved one?
- What did I miss doing?
- What did I do with my time before I became a caregiver?
- What were my hobbies?
- What have I always wanted to do?

Practicing good self-care.

Since many caregivers feel they need to “be strong” for their loved one, their own needs are often put aside. After your loved one's death and your role as caregiver is finished, it may be difficult to recall what your needs even were before “all this” began. It takes time to process the experience of caregiving. While it might be tempting to eat or drink too much of the wrong things and not be active or engaged, now it's more important than ever to eat right, exercise, and get enough rest. These are self-care basics. It is often prudent to have a physical exam to address any medical issues you pushed aside while caregiving.

At the same time, recovering from caregiving also requires paying attention to your own thoughts and feelings. Reconnecting with friends, staying involved in a few social activities or getting back to your faith community may be a start. Also, it can make a difference to have at least one meaningful conversation a day or week with someone who cares about you. You're normal if you look back on your caregiving and feel it was one of the most special times in your life as well as one of the most demanding. Many feel that caregiving transforms them into a different, more compassionate person.

Tips for starting a gratitude jar with your family.

- **Be Consistent:** Choose a consistent time of day to share gratitude with each other. When you have your jar sitting in a prominent spot of your home, like your kitchen table it's a subtle message to everyone that gratitude is an important foundation of your family and serves as a gentle reminder to be thankful.
- **Think about What You are Grateful For:** It doesn't have to be something big. Don't judge whatever comes up. Giving gratitude for anything, no matter how silly or small you think it may be, is powerful.
- **Write it Down: Starting with:** “I'm thankful for _____ today because_____.” and fill in the blanks. If your child is too young to write, you can fill out the paper for him/her or have them draw a picture
- **Put it in a Container:** Using a clear container allows you to see the slips of paper pile up - another visual reminder of how much you have to be grateful for. Kids love to see their jar getting filled higher and higher each day with their gratitude notes. They also love to reach into the jar and pull out their gratitude notes and read them out loud



Indiana University Health

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