In the past several issues, I have discussed the pace of grief (let it proceed at your pace) and the healthy process of grief (helped by caring others and good self-care practices). While there is no end to grief, and be assured, while it softens, grief never truly ends; there is an important milestone in grief—and that milestone is gratitude. Long before grievers surrender the understandable anger of a car accident or a horrible illness, long before they forgive themselves for words spoken in frustration or haste, the quiet moments of appreciation for the person they are grieving may come bubbling to the surface. Gratitude for the life lived is a remarkable gift of grief. It is exceedingly rare for a griever to tell me—“it would have been better if I had never loved her, had this child, cared so deeply—I would rather not have had them than experience this pain.” The pain of grief is devastating and deep—but it is not the same pain as never having loved. Grief is the price we pay for love. But love is fully realized in gratitude, the thankfulness that appreciates what one has—whether deserved or not. Gratitude is what finally “fixes” the deceased in our memory as the recipient of enduring, permanent love. Grief scholars have referred to this as a “continuing bond” with the person who dies. So, just as grief never ends—neither does the loving, yet realistic memory of those we have lost when held in a grateful heart.

We are delighted to invite you to this year’s Grief and the Holidays event, featuring Carrie Pike and Peter Breinholt—please see our back cover of this newsletter for details.

We are here to support you in your grief and extend our warm invitation for you to participate in our grief support groups and Grief and the Holidays on November 12. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter @UofUCaringCon

Warm regards,

Kathie Supiano, PhD, LCSW
Director

“Grief can destroy you—or focus you. You can decide a relationship was all for nothing if it had to end in death, and you alone. OR you can realize that every moment of it had more meaning than you dared to recognize at the time, so much meaning it scared you, so you just lived, just took for granted the love and laughter of each day, and didn’t allow yourself to consider the sacredness of it. But when it’s over and you’re alone, you begin to see that it wasn’t just a movie and a dinner together, not just watching sunsets together, not just scrubbing a floor or washing dishes together or worrying over a high electric bill. It was everything, it was the why of life, every event and precious moment of it. The answer to the mystery of existence is the love you shared sometimes so imperfectly, and when the loss wakes you to the deeper beauty of it, to the sanctity of it, you can’t get off your knees for a long time, you’re driven to your knees not by the weight of the loss but by gratitude for what preceded the loss. And the ache is always there, but one day not the emptiness, because to nurture the emptiness, to take solace in it, is to disrespect the gift of life.”

—Dean Koontz
UPCOMING WINTER 2019 GRIEF SUPPORT GROUPS

SALT LAKE CITY

Wednesday, January 16th through Wednesday, March 6th from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm
Weekly meetings on Wednesday evenings for 8 weeks
University of Utah College of Nursing
Annette Poulson Cumming Building
10 South 2000 East

MIDVALE

Thursday, January 17th through Thursday, March 7th from 6:00 pm to 7:30 pm
Weekly meetings on Thursday evenings for 8 weeks
University of Utah Health Greenwood Health Center
7495 South State Street
Salt Lake City, UT 84047

WEBER COUNTY

Adult grief group for those adjusting to the suicide death of someone close.
Monday, October 29th, through Monday, December 17th from 6:30 pm to 8:00 pm
Pleasant Valley Branch Library Conference Room
5568 Adams Ave
South Ogden, Utah 84405

To register for any class or location, please call 801.585.9522.

There is a participation fee of $50. If this fee is a hardship, please notify Caring Connections. Scholarships are available through the generous support of Larkin Mortuary.

Should there not be enough people registered for a particular group, the group may be postponed.
Good scientific research begins with theory—and later also contributes to theory. According to Rubin and Babbie (2014), theory “is a systematic set of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspect of social life or enrich our sense of how people conduct and find meaning in their daily lives.” Because much of our work at Caring Connections has been influenced by Robert Neimeyer’s Meaning Reconstruction Theory, I was recently invited to contribute to a special issue of Death Studies Journal featuring this theoretical framework for understanding both healthy grief and complicated grief. Briefly, Meaning Reconstruction Theory describes the capability of grievers to come to terms with the loss, to realize growth or benefit that the experience of loss may have brought them, and to reorganize personal identity in the context of loss (Hibberd, 2013).

The framework of meaning reconstruction shapes the procedures and objectives of our work at Caring Connections—and the development and evaluation of our Complicated Grief Group Therapy. For more information, please go to https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/d2cajFXimHAsnB6fq3/full

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**BOOK REVIEW**

**REVIEWED BY VICKI OVERFELT, MA, CERTIFIED MBSR INSTRUCTOR, MINDFULNESS UTAH**

Mindfulness and Grief
Heather Stang

“Mindfulness helps with grief by helping us restore our body from the stressful effects of loss, and by widening our perspective on our experience of loss. It can also offer you a safe harbor when you are faced with ruminating thoughts. A key element of mindfulness is compassion, which starts with yourself.”

In “Mindfulness and Grief,” Heather Stang has provided us with an incredibly sensitive, well-organized, insightful support to grief counseling. It is clear that the author has a deep desire to help us navigate our grief and that she herself has experienced the way in which mindfulness can profoundly assist us on this journey. I was moved by her articulation of “posttraumatic growth,” and the potential within each of us to actually emerge from the grief process stronger, with a renewed purpose and meaning in our lives.

Another beautiful component of this presentation are the stories woven throughout of others who have experienced loss, engaged in the “mindfulness and grief” process and have offered words of wisdom for us as we travel the road of grief ourselves.

Highly recommended is the online companion to this book, found at www.mindfulnessandgrief.com, which offers online support and additional instructional opportunities. Refer to the “Mindfulness and Grief Mini-Course,” link for free registration. Each chapter of the book is supported by mindfulness practice recordings, daily journaling invitations, self-reflection exercises, and the opportunity to write the author with any questions.
I am a second year graduate student in the Doctor of Nursing Practice program, with an emphasis in Psychiatric Mental Health. I was provided the opportunity to co-facilitate a Caring Connections group with Ann Hutton. I had enjoyed my theory courses so far and wanted to gain firsthand knowledge. From my novice viewpoint, most books had educated me on certain therapeutic techniques such as “motivational interviewing” for the resistant client or “validation and listening” to build the therapeutic alliance. I had no idea how to use these skills in practice.

Co-facilitating our suicide survivors grief group was the best experience of my graduate program so far. While it was heartbreaking to hear from each participant and the unique stories of their loved ones, there was something sacred and palpable in that room each week. I was surrounded by commonality and vulnerability between these members. Many tearfully expressed that this group was the only place they could talk about their loved one without feeling judged. A common occurrence was the stigmatization these clients experienced. Many friends and family members distanced themselves, most likely because they did not know what to say and had their own biases towards death by suicide. Caring Connections allowed the participants the opportunity to talk about their experience and to realize that it can be talked about. Even though we are provided a manual, this process is not a controllable sequence of transformations.

We have a general idea as to what topics will be covered regarding grief, but the most important agenda was that of the participants’. Ann modeled this flexibility beautifully. I have an in-depth grasp on concepts such as listening, validation and the grief process. We are listening and we are here. While these concepts may seem simple, the feelings that were validated and the connections that were formed in that room are hard to put into words. Ann was a great example to me on how to become a guide for the formation of this “sacred” connection between group members and facilitators.

MEET OUR STUDENT
TESSA HAMILTON BSN, DNP-STUDENT

OUR MISSION

The mission of Caring Connections is to provide excellent evidence-based bereavement care to grieving persons in the intermountain west through clinician facilitated support groups, with particular attention to the care of families served by the University of Utah Hospitals and Clinics; and, in keeping with the academic mission of the University and the College of Nursing, to provide opportunity for clinical education in grief and loss to students in the health care professions, and to conduct research which promotes greater understanding of loss, grief and bereavement.

Visit us online at www.nursing.utah.edu/caring-connections/
MEET OUR FACILITATOR

MARY MARTINEAU, LCSW

I am a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) and have been involved in Caring Connections since 2012. I had the privilege and good fortune to be trained by Dr. Kathie Supiano while a Master’s student at the University of Utah College of Social Work and have continued to be a grief group facilitator since.

My interest in grief and loss, as well as my love of working with older adults has led me to a very fulfilling career. I have worked as a Care Manager in a Senior Clinic caring for older adults, as well as working in Hospice for several years. Most recently I have provided Hospice care for veterans and their loved ones. Currently in my private therapy practice I provide counseling for grief, trauma and the numerous losses of life transitions such as aging, declining health and retirement.

Caring Connections grief groups offer an opportunity for people struggling with grief and loss to connect with others who are experiencing similar situations. People often come to group feeling that no one understands or can tolerate the extended pain of their loss. Grief groups can provide a safe, supporting atmosphere to express grief fully, to learn with and support others and gain coping skills that are helpful while doing the hard work of moving through grief.

I have learned so much from the people I have had the honor to companion through their grief in the groups I have facilitated. I have witnessed open hearted compassion and empathy for fellow grievers that lifts and supports each personal journey. I have witnessed shared compassion, shared ideas and above all shared hope. A hope that we are able to move through grief and find our “new normal”, our “new chapter” in life with patience, hope and a little bit of laughter.

I am often humbled and astounded at the courage and wisdom of people experiencing the sometimes excruciating pain of grief. I am honored to companion them and learn from them.
I promised my mom, way back in February, that I would write this blog post. We often had long talks about the subject, since disenfranchised grief was something she was experiencing first hand, but I put off writing it until I could adequately say what I was thinking and what she told me she was feeling.

Mom passed away on May 20th, so I won’t get to read her this blog post over the phone, which was her usual way of hearing my thoughts, since navigating a computer was something she just wasn’t interested in learning. I hope though, that her thoughts and feelings will come through and her desire to help ease someone else’s sorrow will be fulfilled.

SEX AND SELF

My dad passed away November 29th of last year. My mom knew that he would likely precede her in death, he was a decade older than she was so the probability was always high, and she often said that she didn’t want dad to have to go through losing another spouse.

When dad finally slipped into that final rest she was strong for her family, loving to her children and grandchildren, but absolutely heartbroken.

I knew she loved dad, their love for each other was something I never had to question. They were demonstrative and vocal in their love and appreciation for one another. But I don’t think I fully realized, until dad was gone, just how intricately entwined their lives really were.

My mom simply didn’t know how to live without my dad.

I stayed with her for a few weeks after dad’s death, just to keep her company and help her get used to being in the house alone. My brother and his family live right next door, so there was never any worry of her being totally alone, but we all knew what a difficult transition death is, and we all wanted to help her with it.

She spoke often in those first few days of how much she had loved dad, about how fulfilling their marriage
had always been. She shared stories of their courtship, their challenges, their commitment to one another. When I finally came home to my own husband and children mom called almost daily, just to visit, to share her thoughts or ask me about mine. Sometimes I could hear the tears in her voice and she would tell me how much she missed dad. The more she called, the more I tried to listen to not only the words she was saying, but the underlying message of her words, and the more time I spent on the internet searching for information about bereavement, grief, and how to comfort her. One day as she was talking to me she said “Dad and I were so well matched Vernie, I miss him being right here beside me. I miss being able to reach over at night and feel him there.”

A light bulb clicked in my brain and again I was researching and reading after our conversation. And the next day when she called I was finally ready to address what she was really feeling.

“Mom,” I said “You’re not just missing dad being there, you’re missing the physical relationship you had with him. You’re missing sex.”

“Yes!” She said, with a heavy sigh, “That’s exactly how I’m feeling.” It was such a relief to her to have me put into words what she was experiencing, but didn’t feel she could say, and it opened a floodgate of communication between us. She shared how beautiful their sexual relationship had always been, what an important part of their life it was, and how up until just the last year, when dad’s health really began a steep decline, they had continued to have a very active and fulfilling sex life.

I told her “The thing about losing dad is that you haven’t just lost your spouse Mom, you’ve lost a part of yourself too. The sexual side of your life is missing, and that’s a part of yourself that has been enormously important to you, and rightly so. You’re grieving dad, but you’re also grieving a loss of self as well.” Knowing that I recognized what a sorrow it was for her seemed to help her. It made it easier for her to talk to me about it.

**DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF**

Everyone in our culture seems to understand the need for sympathy for the widowed. No one doubts the grief of losing the person who is supposed to be the most important person in your life. But for those widowed in their retirement years, it is expected. Everyone knows they’re getting older, everyone sees that they are slowing down, everyone accepts that one of them will probably die first and leave the other alone, because that’s the natural way of things.

We send our condolences, we take in meals, we offer sympathy, and then...life goes on.

If the bereaved are young we fully expect that they’ll eventually move on, find someone after a socially acceptable amount of time has passed and build a life again. We don’t expect that they will never have another sexual relationship in their life, we naturally assume that they are young and vital and that they will in time.

**BUT WHAT OF THE ELDERLY?**

For some inexplicable reason our culture expects that the elderly experience a different kind of grief. As if age makes the death of a spouse, and that loss of a sexual relationship, expected and therefore somehow “less.” Those widowed are supposed to accept it with grace and wait patiently for their turn to die. Alone.

We expect them to miss their spouse, but we don’t expect them to miss sex. Even worse than that erroneous expectation is the laughable quality of sexuality in the elderly population. As if getting older somehow changes who we are in the heart and mind just because the body changes.

About five years ago I was visiting with my mom about the process of aging and she shared exactly what it feels like to get older.

“It’s not like you wake up one morning and feel older,” she said, “I don’t feel any different now than I did when I was 20. I’ve got aches and pains, but who I AM is the same. Then I wander into the bathroom, look in the mirror, and think ‘What the Hell happened to me?!’ That’s what it’s like to get old.”

If that’s what it’s like to get old, why do we expect the elderly to suddenly stop caring about their sexuality? Why is the idea of our parents or grandparents not only engaging in sex, but actually enjoying it, something we find funny or embarrassing?

Psychologists call this kind of grief “disenfranchised” because it isn’t fully acknowledged by the rest of society. Those who experience this kind of grief are left feeling very alone, and often judged for not meeting a socially accepted standard of behavior. We are uncomfortable if people grieve too long, grieve too deeply, or grieve when we think they shouldn’t.

*Sex, Death, and Disenfranchised Grief continued on page 8*
Where the elderly are concerned, our culture has an expectation that a grandmotherly or grandfatherly individual will no longer miss, long for, or think about sex if they are widowed. At best it is laughable and at worst it is either taboo or immoral. I assured my mom that neither was the case. We talked at length about how important her sexual memories of dad were to her, how precious they were and that it was perfectly normal and right for her to revisit those memories. They belonged to her, they were a sanctified and sacred part of their marriage covenant, and there was nothing wrong in bringing those memories close to her mind and heart.

Knowing that she wasn’t alone, that there were other widows experiencing loss the way that she was made a big difference in her dealing with her grief. She talked about it openly at her grief counseling sessions. She shared an article I’d sent her on the topic with her grief therapist. She reached out to the other women in her group bereavement sessions to let them know that they were not alone either.

A TOUCH OF KINDNESS

Over and over again my mom spoke of how much she missed the physical touch of my dad. The need to feel the touch of another human being, just a hug or the touch of a hand on hers to ease her loneliness and sorrow, meant the world to my mom. She made a point to tell multiple family members to “remember the widows.” To reach out to them with not only words of support, but with an embrace.

“You have no idea how much it means to have someone hold you for a few minutes Vernie Lynn,” she told me. “Until you’re alone, you just have no idea how much it means. There’s no other grief like this. Find the widows and reach out to them. Hug them so they know they aren’t alone.”

For the past 5 months, since I’ve been studying massage therapy, I’ve been on my own journey of learning to give and receive physical touch more easily. Her words helped me to see the limits we place on ourselves in society. The distance we keep from one another and the loneliness it breeds.

I promised her that I would remember the widows.

A week before mom passed away she called me early in the morning. It was 5:30 am my time, she just couldn’t wait to tell me, there was so much excitement in her voice. She said “Vernie! I danced with my sweetheart last night and I could actually feel him holding me close. I could feel him!”

It was a tender mercy for her very, very lonely heart. Slowly but surely she was beginning to mend, she was looking for ways to reach out, to find others like herself who needed a touch of kindness.

The day before she had the stroke that eventually took her life, she called me. Again, early in the morning, this time with tears in her voice. I asked “How are you doing today Mom? Was it a hard night?”

She wept a little and said “Yeah, it was a hard night. I got up this morning, ready to go out and it hit me all over again that he’s gone. He’s gone Vernie Lynn, and I miss him so much I can’t stand it.” I mourned with her, let her pour out her sorrow. It always seemed to help, to ease it by simply speaking of it. Sometimes all it takes to ease pain is being free to name it.

Grief comes in waves. Part of not making any kind of grief disenfranchised is recognizing that it doesn’t follow a timetable. Just because she was making the choice to be out and about again didn’t lessen her loss. It was still raw, clawing at her from the inside out, always waiting and threatening her newfound acceptance.

That was the last time I spoke to my mom. I am grateful that the last conversation I had with her was filled with love. Most of them were, she was always full of love, but I’m glad that she could talk to me, share with me, and find peace in the words.

HOLDING A SPACE FOR GRIEF

I miss her. More than I know how to feel right now. There’s an unreal quality to losing my mom. Some mornings I wake up thinking that the phone will ring any minute and I’ll hear her voice on the other end. It always surprises me to remember that I won’t hear that voice again.

My grief at losing my mother is socially acceptable. But I don’t feel very comfortable showing it. I’ve noticed that losing both parents within six months of each other affords me an extra dose of compassion if it comes up in a conversation and I’m grateful for it, but I don’t know what to do with it. Compassion from multiple sources has been a blessing for me, I’ve held them near my heart, those thoughts and words from
Grief is not easy, nor is it fun! While most of the people around us are motivated by love and compassion, we can also be confronted by some who are not motivated by compassion and who make demands upon us by seeking only selfish profit or power.

One often-neglected aspect of surviving grief is honesty, which becomes even more important when we come face-to-face with those who are motivated by greed, power, demands or perspectives that are different from our own. When critics suggest that we are grieving improperly, or where people seem to be trying to gain power or position over us it is important to respond with honesty, compassion and even humility. By expressing our thoughts, beliefs, and feelings without hostility, anger, or aggression, we can expect others to also respond without anger, hostility or aggression.

There are generally two results of being honest with others when we are grieving. People may avoid us, not return our calls, cease to be part of our lives and continue to argue, manipulate and show mistrust. Or, others will draw closer to us, show greater respect for us and our positions, and encourage us to share our wisdom with them. By being honest about our own suffering, grief can be alleviated, but recognizing and acting on what we believe to be the best path in the struggle for peace and happiness can be difficult.

It is easier for the harsh critics to try to get us to follow the correct “stages” or paths the “experts” suggest, or for them to just let us “wallow in our self-pity.” They are confused, lost and hungry for wisdom and answers, but answers and paths are not clear, Thomas Moore suggests that people in therapy often say that they are overwhelmed by feelings and events that are too complicated to handle. He argues, however, that if the bereaved could only think through their values and conclude some theories about life in general (and their own lives in particular), the sense of being overwhelmed might be tempered (Moore, 1992: 247).

The death of a loved one is not the first time we have suffered. Life is filled with both blessings and burdens, and we will continue to have blessings after our loved one has died. While we have each lost someone who is dear to us, we can also continue to have a relationship with them and make them a part of our lives! As with all aspects of life, we can choose to focus on the negative in the world around us, or we can focus on the blessings of life around us. Focus is a choice!

Moore also suggests that there may be pleasure in longing for the past and indulging in memories (Moore, 1994:9). In our grief we certainly do that, but we must also be honest that our loved ones would want us to...
seek happiness and to have a good life even in the face of profound loss.

Henri Nouwin proposed that detachment and brokenness is the approach that most people take when a death occurs. When we are broken, it is common to feel useless or worthless, and the death seems to underline that sense of brokenness. Nouwin further suggest that a better response to brokenness is to put it under a blessing (Nouwin, 1992: 96). Is my life better because this person was part of it? Can I smile when I think of them, even though they are not here now? How can I find the blessing in suffering? Is my response one of the selfishness in which everything must evolve around me? Am I over-grieving, making myself more miserable than I should be? Is my grief more about my guilt than my loss? Am I making myself even less happy because of my own moral failures? Should I have been a better parent, spouse, sibling or friend? But was I really so bad; did my loved one love me anyway? Was my loved one perfect? Could we have loved each other so deeply if either of us was perfect?

While it is not productive for us to focus on the faults of others, it is just as important for us to be able to atone for and forgive our own faults, so that we can find an acceptable level of happiness after the death of a loved one. Our absent loved one still loves us; why can’t we still love them? John Donne argues that it is the willingness to suffer that enables us to love.

While sadness and pain are a part of our lives, so, too, can be joy, delight and happiness! Wilson Miscamble believes that suffering is a part of our lives that cannot be explained away, and we simply cannot just “grin and bear it.” Rather, we must come to accept the suffering and use it to become more open to the suffering of others. (Miscamble, 2000: 56).

In loss, we may stay detached and fail to grow, but detachment often makes life seem stale and flat. Attachment leads to growth! Rather than becoming absorbed in outside things, we can choose to find joy, life, and sunlight to our souls from deep inside ourselves. Not only do we need to remember those who have died, we need to keep them as a part of who we are, and find joy in the things of life that gave them joy! We need to share our joys as we journey through life without the physical presence of our loved ones, but with them in spirituality of our soul!

Gerry Cox. (Spring 2013) The Truth about Grief Digest Magazine, 10 (4), Reprinted with permission.
You are invited to attend Grief and the Holidays: Bearing One Another’s Burdens. Each year, we offer this program to assist grievers and those who care for them in navigating the difficult holiday season. This year, we feature Carrie Pike, who has cared for countless grievers with her CarrieBears program—including the firefighters, police and port authority officers who survived 9/11. We are delighted that renowned guitarist Peter Breinholt will perform. Please join us.

Monday, November 12, 2018 | 7pm | Annette Poulson Cummings College of Nursing Building

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Health Care Heroes

Utah Business Magazine named the Caring Connections Grief Group facilitators as Health Care Heroes. Our volunteers are clinicians who donate their time to assist individuals and families through their grief in our support groups. Dr. Ann Hutton is featured in the magazine article. https://utahbusiness.com/september-2018/

Out of Darkness Walk

We were pleased to support suicide prevention efforts in Utah by participating in the AFSP Out of Darkness Walk. Over 7000 people walked in honor of those who have died by suicide, and those at risk for suicide. The Utah Chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention will be hosting Suicide Survivor Day 6 events around Utah on November 17. Please see the AFSP website https://afsp.org/find-support/ive-lost-someone/survivor-day/

Rising Star Daniela McCroby

Our soon-to-graduate nursing student Daniela McCroby was honored as a Rising Star at the national Sigma Theta Tau honor society of nursing conference, and presented a report of her undergraduate research involvement at Caring Connections.

Grief Support Groups by Daniela McCroby

Briefly, there is great importance in grief support groups. Participants learn about their grief while building relationships amongst group members. They learn how to create new memories while remembering the old. A grief support group provides a variety of perspectives on the experience of grief, therefore participants can learn of, share with, and support one another. A person doesn’t have to face grief on their own, but can be assisted with the support of others.

Caring Connections: A Hope and Comfort in Grief Program

Presents

Grief and the Holidays
“Bearing One Another’s Burdens”

With speaker Carrie Pike, creator of Carrie Bears
and author of “Something to Hold on To: A collection of stories from Grief to Hope”

MONDAY, 11/12/18 | 7pm
University of Utah College of Nursing
Annette Poulson Cumming Building
10 South 2000 East, 2nd Floor Auditorium

Music provided by Peter Breinholt,
Nationally Renowned Guitarist

Free and open to the public. Free parking is available. To learn more, contact Caring Connections at 801.585.9522.

Grief and the Holidays is made possible through the support of our sustaining sponsor Larkin Mortuary

Contact Caring Connections at 801-585-9522 or visit www.nursing.utah.edu/caring-connections/