This fall finds us still in the pandemic with mounting deaths and illness. As I write this, we have now passed 700,000 American lives lost, and nearly 3,000 Utahns. We grieve with those who are suffering these deaths. We have also witnessed two other profound milestones as Americans—the 20 year anniversary of the 9/11 attack on our nation, that took the lives of 2,977 victims (NBC News) and the ending of the war in Afghanistan. That war’s human cost was American service members killed in Afghanistan through April: 2,448; U.S. contractors: 3,846; Afghan national military and police: 66,000; other allied service members, including from other NATO member states: 1,144; Afghan civilians: 47,245; Aid workers: 444; and Journalists: 72 (Associated Press).

This many deaths—and the untold thousands who grieve these deaths are almost beyond comprehension. Sadly, the overwhelming magnitude of these casualties often leads to people to ignore or even forget the impact of these losses in the lives of so many. As we approach the remembrance of our veterans whose lives were lost in service to our shared ideals, I invite us to reflect on the cost to individuals. Numbers can numb us, but individual losses mirror those in our own lives—the griefs and sorrows we each bear when dreams are not realized and relationships end too quickly. I invite us to reflect on the meaning of the word “compassion”—a word that translates to co-suffering. Those of us not directly affected must recognize that we can never fully comprehend the grief experience of those who have lost a family member to Covid, in 9/11, or to war—nor to suicide, nor to overdose death—though nearly all of us have suffered. But every one of us is called and is capable of compassion. We can, even in these polarizing times see the pain in others and rather than keep our co-sufferers at a distance, we can care. This is why grief groups can be such edifying experiences—grievers are truly not alone in their suffering.

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the amazing story of the Caring Connections 9/11 Grief Bear Project—please see the story in this issue. And—please join us on November 9 for “Seeds of Remembrance: Making Peace with Grief” featuring Jennie Taylor, Gold Star widow of Major Brent Taylor and Josh Hansen (US Army, retired) of Continue Mission. Details on the back page of this newsletter.

“Without heroes, we are all plain people, and don’t know how far we can go.”

—Bernard Malamud

IN THIS ISSUE

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Registration required, 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.

Online Grief Support Groups
(Held via Zoom)

- **Loss of a Family Member or Friend**
  Tuesdays, January 11 to March 1 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm
  Wednesdays, January 12 to March 2 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm

- **Loss of a Spouse or Partner**
  Wednesdays, January 12 to March 2 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm
  Thursdays, January 13 to March 3 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm

- **Loss to Suicide**
  Wednesdays, January 12 to March 2 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm

- **Loss to Overdose**
  Thursdays, January 13 to March 3 from 6:30 to 8:00 pm

Online COVID Support Groups

**COVID Grief Support Group**
Tuesdays, January 11 to March 1 from 5:30 to 7:00 pm

This group will be focused on COVID-19 related grief—this includes those who have lost a family member or friend to coronavirus as well as all who are grieving deaths that were disrupted.

**COVID Recovery Support Group**
Tuesdays, January 11 to March 29 from 10:00 to 11:30 am
Tuesdays, January 11 to March 29 from 5:30 to 7:00 pm

This group will be focused on support for individuals who have had COVID-19 and are dealing with emotional struggles related to their illness and lasting symptoms.
Robert A. Neimeyer, Shani Pitcho-Plorentzos & Michal Mahat-Shamir (2021) "If only...": Counterfactual thinking in bereavement, Death Studies, 45:9, 692-701, DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2019.1679959

One thing we emphasize in providing grief support is that there are no “bad” thoughts or feelings, no matter how distressing they may be. There are however, certainly difficulties when grieving persons continue to ruminate on thoughts, ideas and memories that are unproductive. As we say with feelings—it makes sense that you are walking through anger (or sorrow or guilt, etc.) but it is best not to ‘pitch your tent’ there.

In this study, the authors identified four foci for what they refer to as counterfactual thinking that can impair the grievers ability to move toward integrated grief: “if only” cognitions, directed at the self, the deceased, relevant others, or the circumstances of the death itself. Challenging these ruminative thoughts—whether in our own thinking, with supportive others, in grief groups or in counseling needs to be more “creative than corrective.” These circular thoughts, when persistent, undermine the grievers ability to find meaning in life—a meaning that recognizes that one can live without answers, and accept the ambiguity and mystery of even tragic events.

Losing a Son to Suicide: A Poetic Journey through Grief
Randall Stepp

Questions beget questions, rarely answers, after a suicide. In his poignant book, Randall Stepp re-examines the events leading up to his 15-year-old son’s final night, questioning as most parents would. His search is broader, though. He explores the meanings society gives to suicide: the shame, blame, and guilt that spare others from suffering and distance all of us from the inevitability of death. He probes the challenges of surviving a loved one’s suicide, admitting “the urge to just call myself a victim and give up.” Instead, Stepp re-envisions the future, not with answers but a resolution inspired by the memory of his son: “I can hear you / urging me to live again / To forge a lasting legacy.” This book, in addition to Stepp’s work with Survivors of Suicide support group, is his legacy. Those who have lost loved ones to suicide will find his journey through grief reassuring and affirming.

Although Stepp’s book is a collection of poems, it shouldn’t be a deterrent. His poetry is accessible; his voice, natural and honest. In fact, his frequent use of iambic meter closely resembles everyday American speech, so his poems read more like conversations with a caring individual who knows exactly how it feels to be a suicide survivor and wants you to know that you are not alone.
MEET OUR PARTICIPANT
MARCELINE BROWN

My beautiful 27-year-old son Jak, died from an accidental fentanyl overdose at Christmas time in 2020. I had just seen him a few hours before, on Friday evening and he looked well. He was excited because he was starting a new job the following Monday. I will never forget the look on the officer’s face when I broke down after they came to tell me he had passed on Saturday morning. My heartbreak was overwhelming and the loss is deep and endless. My life is forever changed, as is the life of his 6-year-old son, and the daughter that had not yet been born. People are not sure how to talk to me, and I know I respond differently to others as well. This is what brought me to the group.

I was not doing well dealing with and interacting with others. Both family and friends. I didn’t feel like I could talk to anyone. At that time, I believed no one understood my emotions. I joined the group specifically for those who lost a loved one to overdose to try and get the emotional support and validation that I really needed.

The group was extremely helpful. [Through joining the group] I was able to see that the group members had the same feelings of not being understood by others as I did. And that with this type of loss, there are sometimes terrible and unfair judgements. We were able to be open about that in the group, and support each other in how to cope and respond to judgement, and to our extreme feelings of loss, anger, guilt, confusion and pain. I was able to help others and that was a tremendous feeling for me, and others were able to help me and the feeling of gratefulness that brought to each of us was palpable.

I am not even one year into my loss. I struggle every day. I have learned some things from the group that help me to survive each day. I know I need to continue to grieve, and then at some point I will start to get to know myself again as this new person, and this new ‘life’ without my son. There is hope and relief in knowing I’m not alone and in helping to educate others.

I would recommend joining a group, and if the first one isn’t working, join another and another. Even if they do work, continue to build that support system around you. People that you interacted with before will often slowly fade, and others will find you on this path. Others that can help, understand and have the patience you need to heal. It doesn’t get “better” or “easier.” But you can learn to work with this and survive and hopefully, eventually thrive.

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/
I am a board-certified chaplain whose orientation to religion (like so many of us) is more “spiritual than religious” although I did grow up in both Presbyterian and Lutheran church communities. After dabbling in Catholicism, leaving organized religion entirely, and then deciding I was an atheist when I was in college, I discovered the books of Carlos Castaneda and became fascinated with the study of shamanism.

Shamanism, more than anything else, is about journeying with someone through the depths of their psyches as they seek to put themselves back together (body AND soul) after experiencing crisis. That’s what chaplaincy is about too, and one of the reasons that I began training to become a professional chaplain in 2013. Because chaplaincy, like shamanism, is about walking with someone through the darkness rather than attempting to fix or minimize or advise or even teach from a place somewhere above the pain.

As it turns out, this attitude of being the learner rather than the expert also describes my other professional role—I’m a professor of Anthropology at Utah State University and have dedicated my life to learning from “culture experts” about their deepest human truths. In this role, I’ve always worked at the intersections of health and culture and religion. As a researcher I have listened deeply to people’s illness narratives to learn more about their experiences of suffering and the ways in which they seek care. As a teacher, I’ve taught Medical Anthropology and Anthropology of Religion and many other courses to thousands of students—many of whom have become health professionals here at the University of Utah. In service to my campus community, I co-founded (and currently direct) the USU Interfaith Initiative (http://interfaith.usu.edu) to bridge religious divides by providing safe spaces for authentic sharing of our deepest spiritual truths while building capacity for deep listening to those whose truths are different than our own.

In my chaplain role, I have provided compassionate care to patients in the University of Utah system (both at the main hospital and at Huntsman Cancer Institute) since before the COVID pandemic began. During the pandemic, I have walked with (and deeply listened to) so many patients and their families who have suffered (and sometimes died) from COVID-19 that I felt compelled to offer my support as a facilitator when I learned that Caring Connections was adding this type of grief support group earlier this spring. I am currently facilitating my 3rd COVID-19 peer-support group for those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19.

I’m touched by the quote by Megan Devine in the Caring Connections spring 2021 newsletter, “If every time I tell you that I’m in pain you tell me it’s not that bad, you’re not fixing my pain, you’re just telling me I really shouldn’t talk to you about it.” This quote really speaks to me about the value of grief support groups. It is this orientation of deep listening, of walking with, and of connecting through sharing together that carries the same values I hold as a shamanic practitioner, as a chaplain, and as anthropologist. It is this attitude of deep companionsing on a shared journey that calls me to this work.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought overwhelming grief to many families.

We want you to be aware that FEMA, under the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2021 and the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, is providing financial assistance for COVID-19 related funeral expenses incurred after January 20, 2020.

For information, please refer to this website: https://www.fema.gov/disasters/coronavirus/economic/funeral-assistance
I graduated from the University of Utah in 2008 with my Associates of Science in general education, and then in 2010 with my Associates of Science in Nursing from Weber State University. I then returned to school at Western Governors University to earn my bachelor’s degree of Nursing in 2014, and my master’s degree of Nursing in Leadership & Management in 2017, also from Western Governors University. I began the Psych/Mental Health Nurse Practitioner (PMHNP) program at the University of Utah in the fall of 2020, with an anticipated graduation date of May 2023.

I have worked as a Labor & Delivery RN for the past eleven years and have a specialized interest in maternal mental health. In April 2020 I obtained my Perinatal Mental Health Certification (PMH-C) from Postpartum Support International, after completing courses in psychotherapy and psychopharmacology. I am also a current member of Postpartum Support International. I hope to serve this population after graduation as a PMHNP.

My program director (Dr. Sheila Dayette) suggested that graduate students volunteer to participate and cofacilitate in grief support groups through Caring Connections. She spoke about the program as a great opportunity to experience a support group and be involved with a professional facilitator in the form of a mentor. I participated in my first group in the spring of this year, and just started my third group last week!

The professional facilitators have been incredible. I have been so impressed with their innate ability to connect with members of the group via zoom. Their experience and skills are evident, and they lead groups in a professional and graceful manner. I have learned to hold a safe space for these powerful interactions, to provide support and empathy, and facilitate meaningful connections amongst the group members who are experiencing similar losses.

Ultimately, grief and loss are unique for everyone. Having support through the stages of grief is priceless. Support comes in many forms, and I have been humbled to experience it in this way. We are all on different paths and experience grief and loss in numerous ways. I have learned that navigating through this process alongside those with similar losses can help alleviate some of the burden of grief by showing empathy for others.

“Having support through the stages of grief is priceless.”

Grief can look different for everyone. Healing is not linear, and the stages of grief may occur in a variety of ways. I do believe that grieving people value being heard, value having a support system, and value being given time to heal. Grief is such a personal experience, yet support is such a strong element in the healing process. I have learned that people grieve in a way that is meaningful to them, and that grief has no universal timeline or expectations.

My experiences through Caring Connections have been heartwarming and influential. The ability to participate in a setting with vulnerable people sharing intimate details of their lives and watching them come together to not only receive support but to then support one another, is an incredible experience to witness. I believe everyone can benefit from being involved in support and loss groups, as they serve such a compassionate reminder that grief is powerful and life changing.
The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 traumatized families, their friends, cities, and a nation. In shock, shaken, saddened, and angry, the compassionate staff at Caring Connections: A Hope and Comfort in Grief Program pondered what could they do to ease the pain of such a disaster. There were so many people in distress.

There was a group that we could identify, the first responders: the police, the firemen and women, and Port authority that died in the explosions of the Twin Towers. Beth Cole and Sherry Poulson, and Jan Harvey of Caring Connections were joined by Carrie Pike who had a business of making grief bears out of the clothing of a deceased person for families that had lost a loved one. First, she said no, then yes! We were off to make grief bears.

Many faculty staff, and students from the College of Nursing volunteered to help. Hundreds of people from the community: board members, many denominations of church groups, boy scout troops, individuals, and families would help. Carrie Pike made sure each bear was up to her standards. Pike and Poulson called on businesses large and small to sponsor a bear for $35 dollars (the cost of the fabric, etc). One bear was sponsored by a faculty member who had a service dog, for the police station that lost a dog in the collapse of the Twin Towers. A book on children’s grief was included along with a note from “Caring Connections” and the College of Nursing.

Each bear was made of the blue fabric used to make the uniforms of the police and fire fighters. On the front of each bear was a large patch of the NYC police, or the fire fighters, or the Port Authority and a yellow ribbon around the neck. On the back was embroidered “In Loving Memory” and the deceased’s name, their police department or ladder company or Port Authority, and the date September 11, 2001. On the right arm was an American flag and on the left NYPD, or NYFD, or NY/NJ PA.

Four hundred and three bears were made for first responders’ families and they were delivered to the New York departments. Cole, Poulson, Pike and Brenda Bailey, a board member for Caring Connections, took 15 bears to Engine 54 Ladder 4, 9th Battalion, where they were able to personally give the bears to family members who had lost a loved one from that station. It was a memorable and tender gesture of comfort and recognition for their loss. Caring Connections received many, many thank you letters and kind responses. We hope those who helped with this effort knew of the grateful hearts that received the bears.

On August 26, 2021, 13 US Marine or Navy men and women were killed in a terrorist bombing at the Kabul, Afghanistan airport as the United States military and diplomatic staff, and collaborators were withdrawing.
You’re grieving. You’ve lost someone or something that was very important to you.

Perhaps it’s a death. That person has left an impossible void. Or, the person may be alive but the relationship has died. The sense of rejection is brutal.

Maybe it’s the loss of your job, or an entire career. It might be the loss of your health or ability level.

Whatever the form—and loss comes in many different forms—you are grieving.

You expected to feel sad. “Grief” sounds like a word that would bring sadness, maybe even depression. You may have expected to feel anger at the injustice of the loss. You’ve been robbed of something/someone vital. So anger, yes.

But jealousy? That caught you by surprise.

Merriam-Webster defines “jealousy” as a feeling of unhappiness caused by wanting what someone else has. Harper Dictionary adds “envious” as of another person because of his or her belongings, abilities, or achievements.

Suddenly you are jealous of anyone who still has whatever you lost!

In the context of grieving, calling it “jealousy” seems unfair. Especially when it involves longing for people rather than possessions or power. Desiring to have your loved one back is not the same as coveting your friend’s car or vacation. Longing for your disabled child to have one single friend is not the same as wanting power for yourself. Your desires aren’t selfish; they are good and healthy desires. But now these desires can’t be fulfilled.

Picture a cemetery. Imagine you are standing over the grave where your child is buried. The pain is exploding in your head; your heart is shredded. Other parents around you are busily oblivious, enjoying their children who are still alive. How is that fair? You loved your child just as much as they love theirs! You feel envious of their family’s wholeness.

Or, your partner is gone. The loneliness is so hard. Others around you still have their loving relationships. You needed your partner just as much as they needed theirs! You feel jealous of their warm companionship. You miss that so much.

Perhaps you lost your health. Everyone else is talking about the active things they are doing. You used to do those things, too. But now regular activities are a struggle, and maybe you can’t even leave home. Other people don’t deserve an active lifestyle any more than you do! You envy their physical freedom.

Maybe your career has stalled, you lost your job, and you question your purpose. You constantly hear about peoples’ work lives and accomplishments. To rub things in, they have financial stability, and yours is slipping. Jealousy rears its head.

How do you handle these powerful emotions? And is it wrong to feel this way?

The compassionate view is that envy and jealousy are inevitable aspects of suffering losses, of being human. Naturally you remember what your life was like before the loss. It was a good life; you had good dreams. You
long to have *that* life restored. But it can’t be reversed. And all around you are people who *didn’t* lose those things.

It’s not like you wish them ill! But do they have to flaunt their blessings? Do they have to seem like they feel entitled to it all? Do they have to forget that you were just as deserving?

How are you supposed to carry on when your circumstances bring sadness and theirs bring joy?

Each loss that you suffer seems to diminish you, while others around you go on building their lives. Their posts on social media show them smiling, surrounded by happy friends and family. Each loss that you suffer seems to diminish you, and secretly a part of you might want to see other people be diminished... just to make things more fair. At the very least, they should realize they don’t deserve good things any more than you do. But is that really going to help?

You can make that choice. You can be the person who won’t celebrate with others when good things happen to them. That may be self-protective for a time, and it may be all you can manage.* The other choice is to try to be genuinely happy for others. Even if it costs you something.

Because the alternative is to harbor jealousy quietly in your heart. And if you give jealousy a safe harbor, it’s going to grow.

Losses which cause grief violate one’s sense of justice. It’s true: it isn’t fair. You didn’t cause the pain to rip into your life without your permission. And other people didn’t necessarily do anything to merit their lack of pain. But life will never be completely fair. Some people will lose more than others will. That’s just a fact. Maybe it’s the right time for you to fight for justice. But even justice doesn’t fully repair what’s been lost.

So your jealousy is justified—your loss *isn’t* fair. But where do you go from there? Do you step outside so you can howl at the moon?

What does this world need? Does it need another jealous person, turned inward in self-pity and resentment? Or does the world need people who resist self-pity and who model something better—an acceptance of loss as part of life and a willingness to grow in character? People who are more known for their sensitivity to the losses of others than for their jealousy over others’ gains? People who exhibit grace?

By all means, *feel* sad. *Feel* angry. *Feel* jealous. Don’t pretend it doesn’t hurt. It does hurt, and despite degrees of healing, that hurt may be there for a long time! But don’t *feed* those emotions. Don’t make them your biggest focus, so that they grow and grow to toxic levels. *Don’t feed* them until they harden into bitterness and resentment.

**Feel**, but don’t *feed*. 

*Feel* the feelings when they come. *Feel* them and let them pass on by, however long that takes.

Then, even though the loss hasn’t gone away, make room for something new. Yes, there is grief. Yes, there is loss. Yes, there is the hard stuff. But that’s not all there is.

Make room for contentment in your life. Change “contentment” from a noun to a verb. “Content” yourself in simple joys. You are the only person with this power; no one else can do this for you. Content yourself. Look for things that are surprising or which bring you delight. When you find them, *feed those good things*. Reflect on them. Tell your friends and family about them.

Look for ways to help others. Maybe you can help someone with a similar loss, as an empathetic listener. Maybe you will do something unrelated to your loss, as you discover other needs that you can meet. You have something important to give. Choose to find purpose in your life, even if it’s as simple as making someone’s day. *Feed those good things.*

Evaluate your own life for blessings you’ve been given. Cultivate gratitude for them. Realize that there are others who may envy you. No one has all the blessings, and no one has all the losses. Try not to take your blessings for granted.

Of course, you’ll still feel jealousy from time to time. Especially related to your greatest loss. When jealousy comes, be kind to yourself; don’t beat yourself up. Of course you feel jealous. But that feeling may become a little more bearable and shorter lived. And your heart will be an open heart, a place for unexpected, surprising gifts to land.

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*For example, a woman struggling with infertility may choose not to attend her friend’s baby shower.*
WOULD YOU LIKE TO CARE FOR CARING CONNECTIONS?

Here is how you can support us.

If you want to donate to Caring Connections, you can do so at: https://auxiliary.apps.utah.edu/ugive/designation/1924

For donations of $35.00 or more, you can request a memory wall tile for a family member or friend who has died. After making your donation, send their name, birth year, and death year to adrienne.bott@nurs.utah.edu. These tiles are displayed in the Caring Connections office area at the University of Utah College of Nursing Annette Poulson Cumming Building.

Please keep an eye out for the Caring Connections Annual Appeal, which we will host later this Fall. More information will be posted on our website and Facebook page.

“Grief is a journey, often perilous and without clear direction, that must be taken.
“The experience of grieving cannot be ordered or categorized, hurried or controlled, pushed aside or ignored indefinitely.
“It is inevitable as breathing, as change, as love. It may be postponed, but it will not be denied.”

—Molly Fumia

SUPPORT CARING CONNECTIONS
from a 20-year conflict with the Taliban in Afghanistan that started with the terrorist attacks on September 11th. Poulson, Pike and Cole (now board members for Caring Connections) gathered the camouflage fabric of the Military, the names of the 13 military that died, and made bears for each family. Through mayors’ offices or police stations in each of the 13 military person’s home town, the bears were given to their families. A note was included from Caring Connections and the College of Nursing. Hopefully, the individualized bears offer a small amount of comfort.
GRIEF BEARS AND THE LIVES THEY TOUCHEd


Young Kiersten Haub (left, daughter of the late Michael Haub) and with Carrie September, 2021.

“That bear has been through thick and thin with me... I am so grateful to have had that bear continuously for comfort.”

Making Peace with Grief

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 9 | 7–9PM

Zoom info:
https://zoom.us/j/97317641789?pwd=OTM3NUpoUlfZI0Q0MyRXJlcm5DQmhZz09
MEETING ID: 973 1764 1789
PASSCODE: 939075

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