

Haven Herald



Loneliness, I think, is worse than the loss. With the loss, the pain dulls; but loneliness never dulls: It is fresh and sharp every time it hits you. I knew that I must be careful about what I did in the name of loneliness.

by Sharon Trusty, Widowed

LONELINESS REVISITED

by Joyce Hanson

Loneliness was the topic of the winter 2020 Haven newsletter. Shortly after the newsletter was released, we were forced to deal with loneliness on a scale never imagined. The pandemic created the fear that connecting to others would spread disease, giving rise to the possibility that togetherness which eases loneliness, could be dangerous and even life threatening.

Illness and death brought new challenges as we were forced to look through windows while waving hellos and goodbyes. No longer was it possible for a mutual sharing of memories, expressing gratitude, providing comfort or saying final goodbyes. Our ritual of having family and friends present at the last moment of life was no longer possible.

The process of assessing the long-term effects resulting from this increased loneliness is ongoing. Just as in grief, each individual's life will be affected in ways uniquely their own. Research continues to show that people need social contact.

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Letter from the Executive Director

The summer brings hot days, sunshine, late afternoon thunderstorms, and, for some, a change of pace. During this season when families and friends spend time together, we may find ourselves reminiscing about summers past and recalling childhood memories. At Haven many of our volunteers travel during the summer and things do slow down a bit, but there is still work to be done as we prepare for our "Journey through Grief" workshop, organize a training class for new group facilitators, and plan our fall programs.

The topic of this newsletter is loneliness. When people are in grief there may be times when missing the person who has died can bring intense loneliness and a yearning for their presence. Loneliness is a very difficult aspect of grief for many people so it is important to find ways to cope. Talking to someone you trust or who has shared memories can be a start, but it's often not enough. Finding a balance with your loneliness may eventually lead to making decisions that are painful but also helpful. Seeking out new friendships and exploring different opportunities can make a difference as you learn to live without your loved one. Although you will always miss the person you lost, eventually the loneliness will become less intense.

Jill Bellacicco

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In an unusual move in May 2023, the US Surgeon General Vivek H Murthy, issued an advisory about the dangers of loneliness to public health. The harm caused is exacerbated when death severs long standing emotional ties with others. These long standing relationships cannot be easily replaced, however, opportunities exist to forge new ones. Furthermore, Dr. Robert Waldinger, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says, as quoted in an article by Judith Graham in the Washington Post of April, 25, 2023, that there are additional benefits from these ties including "social support, practical help, valuable information and ongoing engagement with the world around us" which are valuable and remain even when family and friends die.

An article in the New York Times by Paula Span on April 25, 2023 discusses the importance of casual or peripheral relationships. Included are exchanges with neighbors, coworkers, cashiers, restaurant servers and others with whom we interact. These were lost during COVID, but will rebuild over time as they fulfill the need for connection in an easy and natural way. A long-term study using older adults found that "the number of weak ties more strongly predicted wellbeing than the number of close ties."

Many people are struggling with the sobering reality of loneliness. An article in the Washington Post of May 16, 2023 by Michael Blackmon and Fenit Nirappil described interviews with six people after the Surgeon General's loneliness advisory. These self-revealing comments are poignant expressions of the difficulties people experience in attempting to ease the pain of loneliness. It reminds us that like grief, each person feels the pain in their own way.

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Loneliness: What Worked for Me

by Orv Grimes

When I lost my wife nine years ago, I was not prepared for the feelings of isolation, abandonment, and loneliness. After 42 years together, having her close by was as natural as breathing. Being with others did not help: That made me ache even more for my emotional partner. I could not impose on my children; they had their own grief. If I was to make it through this, I had to learn some new skills.

The house felt like a mausoleum. So I would turn the TV on, for some welcome noise. Good thing that Nielsen or someone was not counting me as a viewer of shows I was not watching. Beyond these tricks, though, useful as they were, I was making mistakes. The biggest was to fight loneliness. Gradually I realized that loneliness is not freaky or stigmatizing, but part of being human. I needed to accept it, just as I must accept that love is sure to eventually be broken by separation or death. Once that point was reached, my central task became to be comfortable in solitude.

It then became easier to see what remained of my life, to realize not only what I did not have but also what I did. As the fog of my distorted thinking began to dissipate, I saw that other loved ones and friends were still around. They somehow thought that I had something left. I will always be grateful to them for that. I began to re-commit myself to them and their needs, to causes my wife and I held dear, and to lifelong learning. Projects became my companions. A project could be anything, from preparing teaching materials to staining the back fence. For the most part, the projects were ones that my wife would recognize as something I would do. It would comfort me to feel her with me as I was involved in them.

Loneliness to the grieving will never go away for good. Fortunately, we can take steps to keep it mostly on the sidelines.



Another lonesome morning,
 Another lonesome day.
 You'll have to live without him
 The morning seems to say.

“Another lonesome morning”
*Written by Clinton Codack and Wendy Special,
 Sung by Emmylou Harris*

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Brief descriptions of the views of those interviewed:

Veronica Stevens says that the remote connections after COVID allowed her to avoid the chatter from colleagues about their families. Her two sons had died in 2020 of different health issues. It hurts when she thinks about those who "go home to families and I go home to four cats." She is still lonely but she manages with social media, meditation, and Buddhism.

Mary Ramsey likes to do things alone. She explains: "It took me a long time to realize I am pretty solitary and that's okay...." She finds it "a struggle to overcome a social pressure to constantly spend time with others."

Antonia DeLuca is aware that having moved to a better climate in retirement, she was left without family and friends nearby. A chance conversation with a stranger on a bench one day made her realize that one needs to reach out and stop feeling sorry for oneself. She says, "I don't want to become bitter and or angry or hateful, and that to me is part of what loneliness can do to someone."

Mary Jo Drew comments on the lost habit of welcoming new neighbors by visiting and often bringing a gift of food. She feels a twinge of loneliness three or four times a week, and efforts to arrange meeting up after with chance neighborhood encounters never seem to work out. She calls and texts friends to help the loneliness.

Jean Raber sees what she calls "purposelessness" as going "hand in hand" with loneliness. This feeling arose when her mother died shortly after Raber retired. She began to find purpose again during the pandemic when a nurse was so helpful after Raber's husband had a heart attack and Raber admiringly observed the dedicated health care workers. This helped her to, as she put it, "reorder" her thoughts, and she focuses on doing small things, and every day asking "how have I been useful or of service to someone?"

Holly feels the grasp of loneliness "a little bit every day." She sees it in a lack of kindness and courtesy among people in public such as aggressive driving. She explains further: "Loneliness doesn't mean that you're by yourself. Sure, that's a facet of it, but I think it's about connection." A lack of kindness gives her "a sense of loneliness" she says. She tries to recognize that one does not understand what others may be coping with that makes them act in ways that seem lacking in kindness.

As we listen to these individuals talk candidly about their struggles and as we seek to make our world work better for all, we can derive hope from the increased attention to loneliness. More research and understanding will make help more effective and available and continue to decrease the stigma surrounding efforts to treat issues of all types, both physical and mental with equal resources.



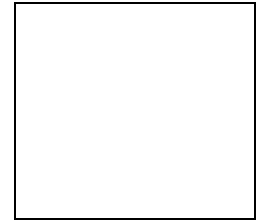
HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net

Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

4606 Ravensworth Road

Annandale, Virginia 22003



Summer Schedule

"Journey through Grief"

Workshop

Saturday, August 19, 2023 2:00 - 4:00 p.m.

Space is limited. Registration is requested.

Four-week Widow/Widower/Partner Support Group

Starting in September, 2023

Space is limited. Registration is required.

Call or email Haven to register for groups and workshops.

Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group

1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month

11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

Haven of Northern Virginia

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday

9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.

www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours