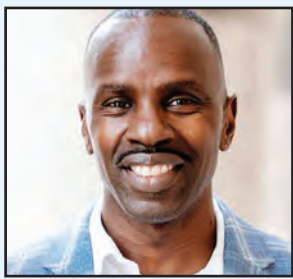


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CARLOS T. CARTER

Navigating loss and grief

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted our Black communities resulting in the loss of many of our friends and family members. In response, this month's health page focuses on ways to care for ourselves and one another as we navigate loss and grief.

What is grief and how does it impact us?

Grief is the sense of sorrow most profoundly caused by death. However, individuals can also experience grief from separation or any form of loss.

In the case of someone's death, grief is particularly challenging as there is finality to the separation.

Grief impacts us in many ways and, when it's not addressed in a healthy way, it can lead to depression, sorrow, and sickness.

Grief can be especially difficult around the holidays, as we are accustomed to our loved ones being a part of our traditions. When they're no longer with us, it can be devastating.

How have you personally managed grief?

This month's health page provides seven ways to take care of yourself during grief. For me personally, taking care of my health, and leveraging my faith community are two things that stood out to me.

When I have experienced loss in my life, I find that exercising, prayer and relying on my faith and friends have been things that have helped me the most.

When I lost my job, my father — and faced other disappointments in my life — I found these things helped me to persevere. Losing someone is never easy, but you must find a way to put one foot in front of the other.

Finally, practicing gratitude has helped me immensely. Learning to count my blessings and being thankful for the smallest things have brought me joy in difficult times.

What are ways in which you would like to see us coming together to support each other in healing and recovery?

In the Black community, there has been a lot of grief associated with the isolation and the large number of COVID-19-related deaths. This underscores the need to support each other. We need to be intentional in our efforts, including reaching out to our family, friends, and neighbors any way we can. We need to provide support and let people know they're not alone.

Our "it's-all-about-me" culture is dangerous. We must check on the well-being of others and be quick to listen to and support people in our community. There is nothing better than someone who provides a listening ear and performs small acts of kindness to someone who's experiencing grief or loss in their lives.

I challenge everyone to be the change they want to see in the world. One person can always make a difference by showing love to someone in their community.

If you are the one experiencing loss, know that it's ok to not be ok. Lean on your friends, family, and faith community. You are loved and we'll help you get through this.

Carlos T. Carter is President and CEO of Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

Grieving as a form of love

Pitt's WELL Study hopes to find out if daily healthy behaviors and coaching can help grieving spouses avoid depression and other health risks

Christmas and Kwanzaa are almost here and most of us are feeling festive — but certainly not if we've lost our spouse or partner. "It's difficult to feel like celebrating when one of the most important people in your life — maybe the most important person — is gone," says Dr. Sarah T. Stahl, Associate Professor of Psychiatry and Clinical and Translational Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

Holidays, anniversaries, and birthdays are hard, especially during the first year of a spouse's death.

During that time of extreme adjustment and stress, the grieving partner is at high risk for developing major depressive disorder. This disorder may contribute to Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia (Source: PLOS Medicine). The stress can also lead to other chronic diseases and even an early death.

Why does this happen? One answer may have to do with the fact that the stress of losing a spouse/partner affects a person's quality of sleep.

Using bloodwork and questionnaires completed by grieving spouses, researchers have found that these individuals experi-

ence serious sleep disruptions. These disruptions are linked to higher levels of bodily inflammation, which is associated with cancer, diabetes, heart attack, stroke, and more (Source: Rice University).

The disruptions also impact circadian rhythms, or your body's internal biological clock. The clock consists of a 24-hour sleep/wake cycle. When it's disrupted, you can suffer from chronic health problems like diabetes, cognitive decline, and depression.

"The difference is that people in the WELL group receive weekly motivational phone calls and feedback from health coaches. They're also asked to record their daily sleep, movement, and eating behaviors on their own tablet or PC," she adds.

That difference is what Dr. Stahl and her team hope will help participants deal with stress in a way that prevents clinical depression.

"Our thought is that weekly interactions with a trained healthcare provider, as well as being mindful about daily routines, will make a positive difference in people's grief journeys," she states. "We're predicting that these additional tools will help a grieving person better adapt to the loss. It will hopefully make them more likely to live life on their own and to the fullest."



DR. SARAH STAHL

A good way to deal with the intense loss of a spouse/partner is to establish new self-care routines quickly. That's why WELL participants are encouraged to get regular sleep — including going to bed and getting up each day at roughly the same times.

They're also encouraged to eat healthy meals at standard times and do some physical activity, such as walking.

This daily regularity helps the body to establish a good circadian rhythm, which can lead to better health outcomes, especially for the immune system.

"In addition to capturing some of the WELL participants' behavioral information on activity watches, we ask them to enter that information into a daily online diary," says Dr. Stahl. "We convert what they enter into graphics that affirm their good habits visually."

Also affirming for the WELL group are the weekly phone calls and feedback from health coaches. The coaches encourage participants to

choose their own health goals and come up with ways to meet them.

"We're hopeful that if a participant sets a goal and takes steps to reach that goal — especially with someone who's supportive — they'll be more likely to fulfill the goal and set another," notes Dr. Stahl.

Though the WELL Study is ongoing, Dr. Stahl and her team are already — cautiously — noting evidence of healthy behavior.

"We have participants who, after only two months, are saying that the recording of daily activity is becoming mundane," she says laughingly. "That's a good sign! It says to us that they're beginning to go through the motions so well, the healthy behaviors of rest, food, and activity are becoming routine."

Other things Dr. Stahl and her team are noting as they study spousal grieving are less measurable and more insightful.

"We continue to observe that grieving for a spouse is a highly personal journey," Dr. Stahl explains. "It's different for everyone and there's no right way to grieve. While many people want to know when they'll be 'better' or 'finished' with their grief, that doesn't seem to happen."

Instead, what does happen is that as time passes, grief begins to look less like pain and stress and more like love. "Grieving

seems to be, for many of the surviving spouses we're studying, the final way they express their deep love for the person they've lost."

To try and lessen this stress, Dr. Stahl and her team of researchers are conducting the Widowed Elders Lifestyle after Loss (WELL) Study at Pitt. WELL's purpose is to learn about older adults' health behaviors and mood as they grieve during the first year of loss.

The ongoing study lasts 15 months for each participant, but it's most intensive during the first 3 months.

"The study features seven virtual visits on Zoom or by phone," explains Dr. Stahl. "Participants must be over 60, bereaved within the last year, have access to a phone, and have a mild level of depressive symptoms. If they meet these requirements, they're randomly placed into one of two study groups: A WELL intervention group or a usual care (control) group."

According to Dr. Stahl, both groups receive written information about healthy lifestyle practices. They also occasionally wear activity watches that monitor sleep and daytime activity, answer questionnaires, and complete interviews.

7 ways to take good care of yourself while you grieve the death of a spouse

Many people who've experienced grief may suggest that you "keep busy" to distract you from the devastation of losing your spouse/partner. Keeping busy can help, especially as you take care of details immediately after the death — and while family and friends are available to help you.

However, a day will come when you must face this life-changing event and begin to create a new life for yourself — hopefully one that's healthy and meaningful.

As you grieve, please consider these ideas from the University of Pittsburgh's WELL Study group and the National Institute on Aging:

Take care of your health
Grief can be hard on

your mental and physical health. To minimize grief's impact, exercise regularly, eat healthy food, and get plenty of sleep. Bad habits, such as smoking and drinking too much alcohol can put your health at risk, so avoid them. Consider going to grief counseling or seeing a therapist if you're feeling hopeless or isolated by your grief.

Through its WELL Study, Pitt offers a Participant Resource Guide, which provides contact information for mental health sources, grief and bereavement support, activity resources, and more. Download a copy by logging on to pittwellstudy.com. At the top of the page, click first on "Resources" and then "Download full Participant Resource Guide."

Eat right.

Some widowed people lose interest in cooking and eating. To get good nutrition, have lunch with friends. If you're eating at home alone and it's too quiet, turn on the radio or TV during meals.

For information about nutrition and/or making meals for one person, visit your local library or search online. For example, log on to YouTube and search for "meals for one person" videos.

Spend time with caring family and friends.

Let family and friends know when you want to talk about your spouse/partner. They may be grieving, too, and may welcome the chance to remember with you. When possible, accept their offers

of help and company.

Spend time alone, too.

Don't feel obligated to accept every invitation. It's okay to spend time alone if it's not isolating.

Visit with members of your religious community.

Many grieving people find comfort in their religion. Praying, talking with others of your faith, reading religious or spiritual texts, or singing/listening to meaningful music may also be helpful.

See your doctor.

Keep up with visits to your healthcare provider. If it's been a while, schedule a physical. If you're comfortable, tell your doctor about your spouse's death. Inform the doctor about any pre-existing and/or new health conditions. Let your

provider know if you're having trouble taking care of your everyday activities, like getting dressed or fixing meals.

Be mindful of special events.

Birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays can be difficult when you're grieving, so prepare ahead of time. Decide which activities you'd like to attend and decline others. Be aware of what you can handle emotionally.

Some people choose to create a new tradition, such as setting a place at the table for their spouse/partner on Thanksgiving or asking their grandchildren to create a new Christmas ornament in their spouse/partner's honor.

UPMC offers resources to help spouses mourn in a healthy way

For more than 40 years, UPMC Family Hospice has provided compassionate and expert end-of-life care to patients and their families.

The hospice team's focus is to provide the highest possible quality of life as they honor the patient's goals and values and support caregivers. Language translation services are part of the care along with a profound respect for cultural needs.

To help with the grief of losing a loved one, UPMC Hospice offers bereavement resources for families and caregivers of people who have died while they were a UPMC Family Hospice patient.

The resources include mailings, volunteer outreach, and individual counseling for 13 months after the loss.

Bereavement Support Groups

UPMC also provides bereavement support groups that are free, open to everyone, and take place in locations in Pennsylvania and Cumberland, Maryland.

These support groups help people who've lost a loved one share their feelings with others who've also experienced a loss. They're led by counselors who have lived experience with loss and grieving.

If you're interested in

learning more about — or attending — a local group, please contact your local UPMC hospice provider. You can also call 1.800.513.2148.

Coping with Grief at the Holidays

The holiday season can be especially hard for people who are grieving. The Coping with Grief at the Holidays video/podcast can help guide people through the process of managing their sadness during this difficult time of the year.

Growing Through Grief

Growing Through Grief is a six-week educational and support program led by bereavement counsel-

ors with lived experience. These caring people create a safe and supportive place where grieving people can explore their loss and deal with it in a healthy way.

The program is free and open to adults aged 18 and older. It's designed for people who are in the first year of their grief journey, but others are welcome.

Sessions are offered throughout the year in several locations. Registration is required. Learn more by calling 412.572.8829.

Cooking for One

The Cooking for One group focuses on the process of adjusting to meals after the death of a loved

one. That includes the amount of food that's prepared and the mindset of getting used to cooking as a single person.

The program consists of four, 2-hour sessions that are typically held at Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens.

In each session, participants will prepare and share meals together under the guidance of a trained member of the Family Hospice bereavement department.

All materials are provided free of charge. Registration is required by calling 412.572.8829 — and will begin for the next session in Spring 2023.