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## Hospice Grief Care Outreach - March

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### Grief and Loneliness

At Hospice, we hear time and time again that winter can feel like a long lonely season for those who are grieving. The snow and cold make it harder to get outside and it can be difficult to make plans to spend time with other people when the weather is so hazardous and unpredictable. The good news is that now (hopefully) winter is releasing its hold as the daylight hours get longer and warmer. However, for people who are grieving, loneliness may tend to linger, not just in winter, but all year round. Loneliness has been described by many people as one of the hardest parts of grieving.

Chances are, all of us at some point have felt lonely feelings to some extent – they are a normal part of being human. Usually we associate feelings of loneliness with being alone, which is often what brings them on. Loneliness is closely connected with being physically and socially isolated. When we're used to spending a lot of time with someone talking to them and just being together, their absence creates a very real sense of loneliness in us. But it is not just being alone that can trigger loneliness - we can be standing in the middle of a crowded room and still feel utterly and completely alone. Feeling like no one is there for us, that no one understands us, or that we have no sense of belonging or connection in the world can also make us feel terribly lonely; even when we have many people around us who love and care for us.

It can be difficult to talk about feelings of loneliness. We live in a world that insists that strength equals independence. Saying "I feel lonely" can feel a bit like hanging a sign on our backs that says, "I need someone". It's an important human need – wanting to feel connected to other people – yet we consistently receive messages this is not okay.

The following article appeared in a newsletter published by Compassionate Friends, an organization with chapters across Canada that provides support to those living with grief after losing a child. It speaks about the shame sometimes associated with loneliness and also how the feelings of loneliness can shift throughout the grieving process.

#### **"Me and My Shadow" by Maureen Kramlinger**

*Perhaps we think if we admit to loneliness, we'll seem defective: "If I'm lonely there must be something wrong with me. Maybe I'm needier than anybody else. Maybe I'm not attractive enough to draw others to me. Maybe nobody wants to be with me." No wonder loneliness holds its tongue, becomes a secret, and leads to more isolation. Feelings of loneliness are normal—a part of our human experience, especially during mourning.*

*Later in grieving, the way we experience loneliness changes. When comfortable habits woven through our relationship are ruptured by loss, and familiar words or actions don't take place, a void is created.*

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*We're devastated when we realize that the familiar call, note or gift from our loved one won't come again, ever. With so much going on inside us, being out in public actually can take a toll. We may not want to be with others. We may feel as if we need time alone to absorb our loss. They may not understand our natural withdrawal, which may in turn intensify our sense of loneliness.*

As this writing suggests, we can feel torn after someone close to us dies – on the one hand desperately wanting companionship and company and on the other, needing some time to be alone and process our loss. For these and many other reasons, feeling lonely is often confusing, uncomfortable, and scary. It is, however, a natural part of grieving and gradually, after much time and reflection, we may come to a place where feeling lonely doesn't seem quite as scary as before. We may begin to take pleasure in our own company and look for new ways to engage with the world. In a beautiful poem called "How To Be Alone", spoken word artist Tanya Davis writes about the possible gifts of loneliness. She provides some creative suggestions for ways to balance the need for solitude and the need for connection. Here are some examples from her work:

*If you are at first lonely, be patient. If you've not been alone much, or if when you were, you weren't okay with it, then just wait. You'll find it's fine to be alone once you're embracing it.*

*We can start with the acceptable places, the bathroom, the coffee shop, the library, where you can stall and read the paper, where you can get your caffeine fix and sit and stay there. Where you can browse the stacks and smell the books; you're not supposed to talk much anyway so it's safe there.*

*Go to the movies. Where it's dark and soothing, alone in your seat amidst a fleeting community.*

*Go to the woods alone, and the trees and squirrels will watch for you. Go to an unfamiliar city, roam the streets, there are always statues to talk to. And benches made for sitting gives strangers a shared existence if only for a minute, and these moments can be so uplifting and the conversation you get in by sitting alone on benches might have never happened had you not been there by yourself.*

Perhaps despite the very real pain of grief-related loneliness, we can start to embrace the permission loneliness grants us to look for ways to be comfortable in our own company. As Tanya puts it in her poem, "Lonely is a freedom that breathes easy and weightless, and lonely is healing if you make it."

At Hospice we recognize that there are many people out there feeling the pain of both grief and loneliness. The attached calendar has activities that can help connect you with others who are going through similar things. Please contact the office with any questions and/or suggestions for ways we can continue to build community through Hospice – a community of care that can help foster connections and relieve isolation, even for a moment.

Resources: The Compassionate Friends Saskatoon Chapter Newsletter, December 2010 – January/February 2011.  
<http://members.shaw.ca/tcfnewsletters/Newsletter%20winter%202010-2011.pdf>

Tanya Davis, "How To Be Alone". Available in print in her book of poetry, *At First, Lonely* by Nimbus Press. Also available online performed in a short video available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7X7sZzSXys>

*If you are no longer interested in receiving our monthly mail out, please let us know.  
Feedback about our programs is always appreciated.*

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