The Ambush of Grief

By Rebecca Simon, MSW, Family Services Coordinator at the Pacific Northwest Transplant Bank

During the busy holiday season, experiencing sadness for the loss of a loved one can feel overwhelming and often isolating. It can be the task on the list that does not get done; it can be the negative thought we push out of our minds with a shrug or a head-shake. It can be a feeling masked by a busy schedule, or a timeline that needs to be fulfilled. But it is there. Sadness can occur for many reasons—when a friend moves away, when a job is lost, when an appointment is cancelled, or when feeling sick. For many, it weighs most heavily after a loved one dies. The ability to express and sit with sadness is different for everyone, and when there is an expectation from others, explicit or sensed, that grief has a fixed timeline, experiencing the feelings surrounding the loss of a loved one can be challenging.

Those who have traveled this journey share that some days and weeks are better than others, and that although it never goes away, the rawness of the grief accompanying loss becomes more tolerable over time. However, what is often left unacknowledged is the significant struggle associated with the routine activities of going to work, school, or social events. In these, there can be an underlying fear that something will unexpectedly spark the unbearable sadness of loss just below the surface. Others talk about dreading the "How are you doing?" question, which if answered truthfully, may push others away or make everything feel even more uncomfortable. In all of this, there is the fear that something or someone will trigger our sadness unexpectedly and leave us feeling overwhelmed.

Years ago, I worked with a gentleman who had recently lost his wife. In our conversations, he described a phenomenon he called “the ambush of grief.” As he explained, "I can be walking through the supermarket on a regular Tuesday afternoon, after a peaceful, nice day, and then, just like that—Kaboom!—I’m blindsided by sadness and find myself sobbing as I try to pick out green beans. It’s from out of nowhere. It’s an ambush.” What makes an “ambush” so seemingly unbearable is that it is a surprise—nothing has prepared us for its appearance. Similarly, there may be very few clues to predict its departure. Because we cannot anticipate when or where an ambush may occur, we must come up with ways to care for ourselves when one happens.

An ambush of grief can trigger feelings other than sadness. It may cause awkward, and unsure of how to act.

Ambush, continued, p. 11
How Family and Friends Can Help

THE HOLIDAYS can be a particularly difficult time for someone grieving the loss of a loved one. Is there anything you are aware of that someone could do for you that would help? Has someone done something for you in the past that you found particularly helpful? Please share with us things that friends and family members have done (or can do) for you to help you get through the holidays.

We asked families these questions on our donor family email list; some of their responses follow. Please visit www.donorfamilyforums.org to read the full responses or share your own experience. To join the email list, write to donorfamily@kidney.org and ask to “Join the NDFC email list.”

—Tara Ivory

My mom passed away four years ago this December. The last time I saw her was Thanksgiving Day and, one week later, she was admitted to the ICU as unresponsive. Because this event is so close to two major holidays, this time of year can be very draining on my family and me. I appreciate those friends and family who do not ignore her presence during holiday discussions, and who understand that avoiding the elephant in the room does not make it less difficult—but in fact, more so. I am grateful for the friends who share stories of her during the holidays and allow her memory to continue on.

—Kelly Schmitt

Losing my son at the age of 16 was devastating, but my family and my son’s friends have been so supportive, even after five years. We have a special tree at Christmas for my son, and every year, my 14-year-old daughter puts a new special ornament on it that relates to something her brother was interested in. On the anniversary of his passing, we have a special web page where the kids and family can talk to him, and I get great joy out of reading all the wonderful and sometimes silly things that are written on there. We continue to celebrate his birthday every year with his favorite German chocolate cake, and this year on his 25th birthday, family and friends wrote notes that we attached to balloons and then released. I am so blessed to have had him for 16 years, and doubly blessed for the support system I have.

—Sonia Fisher

As the Director of Pediatric Critical Care at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, Dr. Nakagawa was recognized for his extraordinary efforts, which include helping to design a butterfly garden and memorial wall while working at the Children’s Hospital in Norfolk, VA. He also designed a special pin to recognize the courage of families of child donors that is given out at the Brenner Children’s Hospital in Winston-Salem, NC.

For those Who Give and Grieve Editorial Board member, Jim Warren, spoke with Dr. Nakagawa about his work with children waiting for organ transplants.

Warren: How would you describe the state of pediatric transplantation today?

Dr. Nakagawa: The state is both hopeful and promising. Last year, for the first time in history, we transplanted more organs into children than there were organs into children than there were

Dr. Thomas A. Nakagawa was the recipient of the 2010 Musculoskeletal Transplant Foundation (MTF) DonorCARE Award, given for his outstanding efforts in the support and care of donor families.

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Little Waves

Like a stone falling in water
You passed beyond our sight
Leaving cherished memories
That ripple through our lives

By Douglas Harrell, Donor Husband
Darryl E.
Reflections
past Christmases and good times.
was a tribute to my son. It filled me
celebrating at our house. When it came
friends who still deserved to enjoy
holidays because DJ could no longer
DJ in July 2006. Even though half a
because I had other family members
holidays because DJ could no longer
year had passed, I didn't look forward

After the holiday season
that year, while
returning all
my cherished
Christmas arti-
facts to their
packaging, I
came across a
little tree that DJ
had made out of
wire coat hangers and
a simple string of Christmas
lights. He saw beauty in simple things.
I had forgotten that. I pulled out that
little tree and repaired it. It has become
a centerpiece for all Christmas gath-
erings, not just because DJ made it,
but because a small, lighted ornament
reminded me that healing starts with a
little light and grows over time. Bring it
out, dust it off, share it with others. Let
your loved ones’ light shine.

Shine a Light!
By Shelly J. Sinn (Till), Donor Mother
I unexpectedly lost my 20-year-old son
DJ in July 2006. Even though half a
year had passed, I didn't look forward
to December. I didn't want to enjoy the
holidays because DJ could no longer
enjoy them. I went through the motions
because I had other family members
and friends who still deserved to enjoy
the holidays and looked forward to cel-
ebrating at our house. When it came
time to exchange gifts, I was given a
small, enclosed, lighted ornament
that was a tribute to my son. It filled me
with a lot of emotions and memories of
past Christmases and good times.

For Those Who Give and Grieve
Volume 19, Number 3

My (Identical) Hero
By Shelby Britt Miller, Donor Sister
What is it like to be a twin? From the
time I was a child, through the passing of
my identical twin Shannon two years ago,
that was the question that people
asked me the most. My answer was quite
simple: "It is all I know and it is amazing—
what is it like not to be a twin?"

Growing up, Shannon and I were
always together. We attended universi-
ty together, started two companies
together and were never apart for any
extended period of time over 35 years.
The "twin bond" is real. I was the first
to hear her heart beat in utero, and
then on August 14, 2009, I would be the
last to hear it.

Shannon had just given birth to her
second daughter. A week later, she had
a migraine headache, which was not
uncommon for either of us. When the
headache persisted, we decided to go
to the hospital. Driving there, my gut
sensed was 198/100. Shannon was able to donate everything—
all her organs, eyes, bones, and tissue. She replied, "Tonight or tomorrow." My
reply was, "I do not care if they are in
New York—just get them here." Shannon
was going to donate everything.

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Shannon's spirit was living on, and this
gentleman was able to live and love his family
because of her gift of life. It was
such an amazing moment.

To find solace, I walk the beach every
day and find sea glass so that her chil-
dren would know that their mommy was a hero.

Three Rocks
By Marilyn Dumbough Meneses, Donor Wife
My husband John was considered a
"rock" to those who knew him and
learned on him.

At the end of the funeral, there weren't
many stones left in the bowl. Over the
past year, I've been approached by family
members and friends who show me that
they still have their rock and tell
stories of how it has helped them.

For Those Who Give and Grieve, Volume 19, Number 3
We granted permission and immediately made arrangements for our son, Jeremy. He had sustained a severe head injury from a motorcycle accident while riding with friends. The Mexico Hospital trauma unit was on the other end of the 1400 miles from home. A nurse from the University of New Mexico, the Land of Enchantment, called my phone asking for permission to provide medical care for our son, Jeremy, who was a University of New Mexico student, living on campus. I drove to the hospital, a little too fast, noticing the stress of grief taint of hatred they may feel toward their loved one without the enemy or someone who has caused you harm, and, finally, all living beings against each other. This can severely shake our deepest held assumptions about how we view the world, our faith in God, and our beliefs in justice. Depending on the circumstances, we may be constantly reminded of what happened to our loved ones by intrusive and insensitive media attention. In these situations, the intensity of acute grief can come back again and again, sometimes without any sense of predictability or foresight.

With the families of murder victims, the grief journey is often dictated by the legal process, which is much different from the emotional process. When our loved one is murdered, we don’t get to say goodbye. We wind up going back in our minds to the last conversations we had with them—did we say enough? Did we do enough? Could we have done something differently? There are layers of unfinished business that often can’t be fixed. One of the main challenges is to develop a relationship with a murdered loved one in which the manner of their death isn’t mixed in with every thought or feeling we have about them. One of the things I have found to be the most helpful for all grieving people is to let them know we all grieve differently, and that grief has a lot of ups and downs; it’s often not very neat or orderly. There is no perfect way to grieve. That being said, all grieving people need to make a special effort to engage in self-care. Good nutrition, sleep, regular exercise, and meditation are the ideal cornerstones of any healthy lifestyle, but more so when we are experiencing the stress of grief.

In my book Grieving Mindfully: A Compassionate and Spiritual Guide to Coping with Loss, I encourage grieving family members to begin the practice of mindfulness meditation to manage the stress of grief. Mindfulness mediation is currently the focus of extensive research, and the science validating its beneficial effects is constantly growing. The book uses this exercise in different ways, because if there is one thing that I feel grieving people can benefit from, it is better stress management.

I have also found that loving-kindness meditation, metta practice, is uniquely suited to help people grieving the loss of a murdered loved one. Metta practice involves visualizing in stages: first yourself, then your loved ones, then an enemy or someone who has caused you harm, and, finally, all living beings sending them unconditional love. The benefits of the practice are often immediate, but they also continue to unfold over time. For the families of murder victims, it can connect them with their loved one without the taint of hatred they may feel toward their memory.

By Sameet Kumar, PhD

Editor’s note: While this article specifically addresses grief after a murder, it contains good information for all grieving families, and particularly those who have lost their loved one in an accident or other sudden death.

For Those Who Give and Grieve, Volume 19, Number 3
Loving-Kindness Meditation
by Sameet Kumar, PhD

Losing a loved one to sudden or traumatic death often leaves a feeling of unfinished business or unspoken goodbyes that can linger for a long time. If you lost a loved one due to the harmful actions of another, your memories of the deceased may feel forever tangled with your anger at the perpetrator. Over the years, I have been consistently amazed by the power of forgiveness in the most unlikely situations. The Buddhist meditation called metta, or loving-kindness, can help you unleash the power of forgiveness and bring you healing after violent loss. Parents of murdered children have told me that this exercise liberated their memories of their loved one from the manner in which they died. I hope that it can bring you the same relief.

Find a quiet spot where you can practice this meditation:

• Close your eyes and begin by taking three deep, slow belly breaths. With each breath, bring your awareness from your surroundings to the rising and falling of your breath.

• With your eyes still closed, visualize your body. As you imagine your body, inhale and say to yourself, “May I be free from suffering.” As you exhale, say to yourself, “May I be at peace.” Spend five minutes breathing in this way.

• Now, imagine your loved one as you would like to remember them. Open your heart to them. As you inhale, silently extend to them the wish: “May you be free from suffering.” As you exhale, silently express this wish for them: “May you be at peace.” Practice for a few moments in this way.

• Now, imagine the perpetrator. If you don’t know who it was, you can visualize them however you imagine them to be. If either of these is too difficult, you can imagine them as a child. Extend to them the same wish as you inhale: “May you be free from suffering.” As you exhale, send the person this wish: “May you be at peace.” Practice this for as long as you feel comfortable.

• Finally, imagine all creatures on our planet: all the people, all the animals, plants, insects, and sea life. As you inhale, send the planet and every living thing the wish: “May we all be free from suffering.” As you exhale, send planet Earth the wish: “May we all be at peace.” Practice for a few moments in this way.

Caring for Yourself During “The Ambush”

REMEMBER TO BREATHE
• Disregard what others are doing. Ignore those who may be looking at you. Just breathe.

• Find a safe place. If you need to sit, find a chair or a wall, or park yourself on the floor. If you are driving, pull over and breathe.

• Get your bearings. Once you catch your breath and survive the initial onslaught of emotion, decide whether you want to continue what you were doing, or save it for another day.

FIND SUPPORT IF NEEDED
• Reach out to family, friends, or colleagues.

• Remember, there is no timeline for grief; your journey is your own.

DO SOMETHING HEALTHY
• Go for a walk.

• Call a friend.

• Give yourself an opportunity to clear your head.

PUT THE AMBUSH IN CONTEXT
• Take a moment to remember all that you ARE doing or accomplishing (i.e., going back to work, picking up your children from school, or even getting out of bed in the morning).

• Remind yourself that it is not uncommon for both sadness and challenge to coexist. When we reference grief as a journey, these are the “rolling hills” on your path.
Over the years we've published many helpful articles on topics requested by our donor family readers. From our most recently published issue, to issues dating back to 1995, you can view back issues of For Those Who Give and Grieve on our website at www.donorfamily.org.

Also, if you would rather receive the newsletter by email to help us save printing costs, please send us an email at donorfamily@kidney.org and we'd be happy to accommodate your request.

The Quilt on Tour

April 9–22*
Mt. Pleasant, MI, Chippewa River District
Library Donate Life Month display
Contact: Andrea Graham, 989.773.3242

One panel of the National Donor Family Quilt is displayed year-round at the National Donor Memorial in Richmond, VA. (This Quilt panel will sometimes be moved for display at other national events.) For more information, contact Erin Kahle at 800.622.9010.

For information about reserving a Quilt panel, please contact the NDFC for updated information and pricing. The NDFC can be reached by email at donorfamily@kidney.org or by phone toll-free at 800.622.9010. Please notify the NDFC of any special requests, including requests for a specific panel of the Quilt. Arrangements will need to be made to display the Quilt properly and obtain permission from the venue where the Quilt will be displayed.

* PLEASE NOTE: This schedule is subject to change. Call the National Donor Family Council at 800.622.9010 for the most up-to-date information. The entire Quilt is not on display at these events, and not all events are open to the public. Please call the contact person for more information.

of the National Donor Family Council
is to enhance the sensitivity and effectiveness of the organ and tissue recovery process, to provide opportunities for families to grieve and grow, and to utilize the unique perspective and experiences of these families to increase organ and tissue donation.