



Journey

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to the Bereaved

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COPING WITH COMPASSION FATIGUE

by M. Donna MacLeod RN, MSN

Whether you care for a gravely ill loved one at home or vigil by a hospital bed in a medical crisis, you may encounter compassion fatigue. It happens when you do everything possible to alleviate another person's distress.

Guided by compassion, you keep giving of yourself even though it hurts. Then your energy starts to diminish and fatigue sets in. Circles form under your eyes. Others may comment that you look tired. Aches and pains begin. It's hard to concentrate. You feel tense and irritable. If you can sleep, you wake up exhausted. Worry consumes your thoughts as your loved one starts to fade away before your eyes. You feel drained. Your appetite may be lost or kick into high gear. Your spirit sags. You wonder how long things can go on like this. You may feel guilty about your concerns because you want to focus on the one you love. You may not realize that you are joined to his or her suffering.

As a cancer nurse specialist I helped caregivers survive fatigue, but it took walking in their shoes to fathom what they were really going through. The epiphany came when my four-year-old Erynne had an abrupt onset of acute leukemia (cancer of blood forming organs).

Erynne faced death, but my husband and I weren't about to let her go. Our family battled cancer with her for almost six years, including several encounters with compassion fatigue. It accompanied me during hospital stays to achieve remission, in critical care where Erynne almost died from chicken pox, and in the final months when leukemia would take her life.

Caring for Erynne in stressful times was exhausting at the emotional and spiritual level. Here's what coping taught me.

Let others help. They can give you a break, entertain your children, do chores, run errands, bring meals, and care for pets, plants, and yards. Accept their offers and also say what you need! People want to minister in your hour of need. This honors your ill loved one and lets you see God's love in action.

Take care of yourself. Staying at the bedside 24/7 is noble but not healthy for you. Have you kept up with your medications? Eating? Sleeping? Bathing? Praying?

Try a walk in fresh air, exercise, or dancing. Your muscles benefit and the endorphin release will brighten your outlook.

Stay connected. You might be busy, but friends and family worry about you. Someone who cares can lift your spirit. If inquiries are overwhelming, shorten visits or try an answering machine and let someone convey your messages.

Find a consoler. A good listener is a gift from heaven. A spouse, relative,

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*Advent
a time of
wonderful,
expectant
anticipation*

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friend, chaplain, nurse, or counselor can lighten a burden that seems too heavy.

Write. Jotting down feelings in a journal lets you express what is difficult to speak and defuses bottled-up emotions.

If you have poetry or stories within, let them flow on to paper. Your insight may surprise you.

Try art. Whether you draw, paint, color with crayons, or make a collage, let your creative side speak. Invite your loved one to join you and build another memory.

Recognize negative thoughts. To stop them, breathe in and exhale forcefully, pushing thoughts away with the breath.

Release the angst. A primal scream can clear morbid thoughts that creep in with fatigue. If you have to keep things quiet, punch a pillow.

Cry. Teardrops release emotions and stress-related chemicals. Crying is God's weapon for the weary.

Laugh. Laughter is medicine for the soul. Watch a sitcom on TV. Read the funnies. Listen to a joke.

Enjoy music. It can bring happy thoughts or make you dance with joy. Sacred music soothes a wounded spirit.

Look at pictures. Invite your loved one(s) to view a picture album with you. Reminiscing about old times is therapy.

Seek the Sacraments. Receive the Eucharist and be strengthened. Attend Mass or have the Blessed Sacrament brought to you and your loved one. The Sacrament of Reconciliation can also lift your spirits. Is it time for the Sacrament of the Sick? Gather the family for the anointing; it's a moment to cherish.

Read Scripture. Find the message of God's love for you. Psalm 23 helped in Erynne's final months. We were in "the dark valley," and the Word lit our way.

Reflect on the Rosary. The Mysteries unite us to the Lord's life and suffering and the Blessed Mother. She understands our pain and intercedes for us. Even holding the rosary or a crucifix can bring comfort.

Ask for Prayers. I saw the power of prayer when children beseeched God on Erynne's behalf one night. The critical care doctors said Erynne was dying. Nothing could be done. But God heard her classmates. The next morning, her life threatening fever broke, and she awoke from the coma.

Call on every person of prayer you know, the Blessed Mother, and the saints. God listens to your prayers too.

Find Christ in your midst. Look for God in everyone he sends you. When you recognize his face in your suffering loved one, you find peace.

When things calm down, go on a spiritual retreat. God might let you in on a secret. Compassion fatigue can bring you closer to him.



M. Donna MacLeod is a writer, lecturer, and certified minister of consolation who has served the bereaved since 1989. She now volunteers for the Diocese of Orlando. Parish guidebooks on Christ-centered bereavement groups that she pioneered are forthcoming (Ave Maria Press 2007). donmacna@msn.com



RAY DEABEL RETIRES FROM THE NCMB BOARD OF TRUSTEES

At the Board of Trustees meeting on October 6-7, 2006, Bishop Joseph Perry, our Episcopal Moderator, presented a plaque and a gift certificate in appreciation to Rev. Mr. Ray Deabel who served NCMB as a member of the Board of Trustees and as President and Past President from 1999 - 2006. The membership and the board are deeply grateful for the eight years of service and leadership given to this ministry.