

Journey

Winter 2026

A grief community publication
from Northern Illinois Hospice



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Coping with Grief During Winter Months

By Cindy Holda, M.Div.

Winter can be an especially difficult season for those who are grieving. Shorter days, colder weather, and the quiet that settles in after the holidays can intensify feelings of loneliness and loss. When the world seems to slow down and retreat indoors, grief can feel heavier and harder to carry. If you're navigating loss during the winter months, know that what you're feeling is valid—and you don't have to face it alone.

Grief often ebbs and flows, and winter can magnify emotions that may already feel overwhelming. You might notice increased sadness, fatigue, irritability, or a desire to withdraw. These responses are common, and

there is no “right” way to grieve. Allowing yourself to acknowledge your feelings, without judgment, is an important step toward healing.

Gentle self-care is especially important during this season. Maintaining regular meals, staying hydrated, and getting adequate rest can help support your body when emotional energy is low. Small daily rituals—such as enjoying a warm drink, journaling, or lighting a candle in memory of your loved one—can offer moments of comfort and grounding.

Exercise, even in small amounts, can be a powerful tool for coping with grief. Physically, movement



First in *caring* for life's final months

Story continues on page 3

From Our DeKalb Bereavement Coordinator

Grief is a complex, winding road, often leaving us feeling lost in a fog of sadness. It can seem as if hope is a distant memory, an emotion that belongs to a life we once lived. Yet, even in the deepest sorrow, seeds of hope can be found. The journey isn't about trying to find a "normal," but about navigating the current landscape with compassion and resilience.

The most crucial step in this process is being as gentle and non-judging of yourself as you can. Grief is physically and emotionally taxing. Your body and mind are processing a profound loss, and this requires immense energy.

There are some things to keep in mind that may help you navigate this difficult time. Acknowledge your feelings and give yourself permission to feel whatever arises. Listen to your body's need for rest. It's okay to have days where you achieve very little beyond simply existing. Finally, try and lower your expectations and simplify your life to the greatest degree possible. It's acceptable to say "no" to commitments and focus on self-preservation.

It's also important to connect with others. While grief can make us want to retreat and isolate, human connection is a vital source of comfort and strength. You do not have to carry this burden alone. Accept support as you're able, talk with trusted others about your feelings, and consider joining a grief support group where you can connect with others who are also on this journey.

And when you consider hope, remember it isn't about pretending the pain is gone, it's about finding small moments of light and possibility amidst the darkness. It might appear as a gentle reminder of your loved one, a moment of peace in nature, or a shared laugh with a friend.

Healing takes time, and you are worthy of all the time and compassion the process requires. Remember to be gentle with yourself, lean on your support network, and know that we are always available as well.

In peace,



Jen Conley LPC LPMT
Bereavement Coordinator



2026 Bereavement Support Groups/Events

These groups are open to anyone who has experienced the death of someone close to them. Our groups and workshops focus on learning, healing, and encouragement. All are welcome.

Memorial Pillow Workshop

January 31
Two Sessions: 9:30 AM
or 10:30 AM
DeKalb Public Library
309 Oak Street, DeKalb

Bridge of Hope Bereavement Care Group - Rockford

Feb. 9, 16, 23 and March 2, 9, 16
10:30 AM-NOON
Northern Illinois Hospice
4751 Harrison Ave., Rockford

Bridge of Hope Bereavement Care Group - Sycamore

Feb. 9, 16, 23 and March 2, 9, 16
10:30 AM-NOON
Northern Illinois Hospice/
Gateway Arts Building
2225 Gateway Dr., Sycamore

The Healing Cup Grief Group

Tuesdays thru May 26
10 AM-11:30 AM
Starbucks
2570 Charles St., Rockford

Healing Together: A Family Grief Support Event

Saturday, March 14
9:30 AM-11:30 AM
Sycamore Public Library
103 E State St., Sycamore
Registration Required
Call 815.895.2500

To register, find the group/
event date on the calendar at
northernillinoishospice.org/events.

As we flow fully into winter, we find that grief is not something to be rushed or overcome but a companion to carry with gentleness. Winter may be long, but it is part of a larger cycle, one that holds the promise of renewal even if we can't yet feel it. By allowing ourselves to sit in winter's stillness, we honor our loved ones, our loss, and the quiet growth taking place within us. — Unknown



Coping with Grief During Winter Months

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helps improve circulation, reduce muscle tension, and support better sleep. Emotionally, exercise can release endorphins that gently lift mood and reduce feelings of anxiety or sadness. Mentally, it can provide structure, a sense of accomplishment, and brief relief from racing or heavy thoughts. Exercise is not about “fixing” grief, but about caring for your whole self while you move through it.

Staying connected to others is also essential. While it may feel easier to withdraw, reaching out to trusted friends, family members, or support groups can ease isolation. It’s equally important to set boundaries around social obligations and honor what feels manageable for you.

If your grief feels especially heavy or unmanageable, additional support can make a meaningful difference. Hospice bereavement teams are trained to support individuals and families through the complexities of grief, not only immediately after a loss, but in the months and years that follow. Reaching out to your hospice bereavement team can connect you with counseling, support groups, and compassionate guidance tailored to your needs.

Winter will not last forever, and neither will the most intense waves of grief. With time, support, gentle movement, and self-care, it is possible to find moments of warmth and light again—even in the coldest

Here are gentle tips for exercising during grief:

START SMALL: A five or 10 minute walk is enough. Consistency matters more than intensity.

CHOOSE COMFORTING MOVEMENT: Walking, stretching, yoga, or light strength exercises can feel more supportive than high-intensity workouts.

LISTEN TO YOUR BODY: Some days will feel harder than others. It’s okay to rest when needed.

PAIR MOVEMENT WITH LIGHT: Exercising near a window or outdoors during daylight hours can help boost mood and energy.

INVITE CONNECTION: If possible, walk with a friend, join a class, or follow a guided video for added support.

months. Please do not hesitate to reach out to your Bereavement Coordinators at Northern Illinois Hospice if you need any resources or additional support.

In Blackwater Woods

By Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and
floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to
let it go, to let it go.



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Simple Rituals to Help Support Your Grief

Funerals often provide the large ritual we think of which marks a loss, but the long journey of grief often happens in the quiet moments that follow. Small, intentional rituals can provide an ongoing avenue for the expression of our grief.

What is a ritual? It is a symbolic act, an external representation of something which is internal. Practicing simple rituals can help us make tangible some of what is going on in our heart. Rituals can also provide a sense of structure and control during a time when life often

feels unpredictable. In addition, performing a repetitive, symbolic act can help maintain a sense of connection with our loved one.

Below are some ideas for simple rituals you might consider trying.

Lighting a Dedicated Candle: Light a specific candle at a set time each day to represent the person's continued presence in your heart.

The "Five-Minute" Remembrance: Set a timer for five minutes daily to look at a photo, say a prayer, or sit in silence. When the time ends,

consciously shift back to the present moment.

A Living Tribute: Plant a tree or a favorite flower in a special spot. Watching it grow provides a powerful symbol of life's continuity.

Letters: Write a letter to your loved one, about your day, or any topic that seems to speak to you.

Continuing a Connection: Carry a "totem" – a small item like a piece of jewelry, a stone, or a handkerchief—to touch to feel grounded.

