LOSS DURING A PANDEMIC
Grief Complicated by Isolation

by Angie McCown, Director
TDCJ Victim Services Division

Most people are not prepared to experience grief and the intense feelings associated with loss. The loss of a loved one, whether the cause is accidental or felonious, is almost always unexpected and sudden. This type of loss is often complicated by a multitude of factors to include media coverage, investigations, funeral, memorials, geographic location of family members, family relationships, and more. However, this year, with the impact of the pandemic, isolation has become one of the complications in grieving a loss. We are living in a world challenged by fear, anxiety, and this pandemic, while not being able to gather in person to support one another.

Grief may be intensified during this pandemic due to increased isolation, heightened anxiety, and a resulting heightened sense of loss. Processing grief and receiving comfort from others is oftentimes non-verbal support through physical interaction – simply sitting with someone, offering a hug or a nod can help survivors feel that they are not alone. Without the ability to be together in person, victim services organizations, to include TDCJ Victim Services, have worked hard to come up with creative ways to connect with survivors through virtual platforms such as Skype, FaceTime, and Zoom.

Grief is messy, there is no right or wrong way to grieve, and there are no simple steps to go through to get to the other side. The first year following a loss can be a blur. It can feel unreal and unbelievable, and you may just be trying to get through one minute to the next. It may seem like you are in a bad dream or nightmare. When that first year anniversary of the death arrives, it can be as if the fog lifts, the numbness begins to wear off, and the loss is more real, and as a result, sometimes the second year can be more difficult. The hope is somewhere in that second-year healing gains some momentum.

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Connecting with other survivors and victim services organizations offers hope; hope that although your life may never be the same, and you will never stop longing for your loved one, you may have days in the future that don’t bring you to your knees, days where heartwarming memories of your loved one bring a smile to your face. TDCJ Victim Services provides the opportunity to be exactly where you need to be in your grief process – no judgements – holding space for you wherever you are, while also giving you a glimpse of hope. Working through grief may be the most difficult thing you will ever do, but it is an essential path towards healing. Remember that you do not have to do this on your own. We are here for you.

Potential Grief Reactions include:
- Anger that the death occurred
- Profound sadness
- Despair regarding lost hopes and dreams
- Loneliness & emptiness
- Guilt
- Irritability
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sense of loss of control

Coping with Grief:
- Be patient with yourself and other family members
- Avoid judgement of other family members as everyone tends to grieve differently
- Take one day at a time
- Practice self-care by journaling and reading helpful books on grief and loss
- Adequate sleep and nutrition are important
- Accept support from friends, family, spiritual advisors, and victim services professionals

“Empathy has no script. There is no right way or wrong way to do it. It’s simply listening, holding space, withholding judgment, emotionally connecting, and communicating that incredibly healing message of you’re not alone.”
- Brené Brown

Sometimes it is about being comfortable with yourself and holding space for whatever feelings may come to you in the moment.
As I’m writing this my heart is heavy, in no small part due to the losses we’ve seen here at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Currently TDCJ has lost 21 staff members, including correctional officers, chaplains, doctors, nurses, and other workers with many years of service, to COVID-19. The number of offender deaths has surpassed more than 160. Families are grieving. There are many others in critical condition or in the hospital fighting the disease and many still dealing with the aftereffects. And sadly our country seems divided in many ways and people are afraid of many things as the world seems so unpredictable and unsafe. Everyone is tired. Tired of adjusting our lives, tired of having to stay apart from our loved ones and friends, tired of the losses, tired of the anger swirling around us.

My heart is also encouraged by the many things I’ve seen at TDCJ and Windham School District (WSD) during this time of crisis. I’ve seen people come together to come up with creative solutions to the many challenges caused by managing a correctional system during a pandemic (and a tornado and hurricanes). I’ve seen support and encouragement shared among staff and TDCJ/WSD leadership and a true spirit of dedication and service despite overwhelming obstacles. Victim Services staff has carried on and carried out their duties in service to victims of crime even when they have had to get creative about how to make that happen as people have tested positive and had to quarantine. Thank you to all the women and men out there doing your best in service of the people of Texas.

Mostly, though, my heart holds on to hope. I hope we can continue to fight the virus and keep ourselves and our loved ones safe and well. I hope we can respectfully listen more to others who may not always agree with us and listen to understand rather than to argue. I hope we can work to heal the divides. I hope we can reach out to each other for support and offer others support when they need it, too. I hope that you and all your loved ones are able to find ways to celebrate the upcoming holidays safely.

Please take good care of yourselves and remember to set aside time to appreciate the good things, time to rest and recharge, and time to check in with others.

Wishing you meaningful holidays this year!
CORE VALUES
Perseverance - Integrity - Courage - Commitment

by Janice Sager, Regional Victim Services Coordinator
Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse

“Core values are an objective guide or standard, to overcome subjective feelings. They help us to operate not on feelings, but on standards. They help provide stability.”

-C. F. Hazlewood, Texas Department of Criminal Justice

I recently had the privilege to sit down with Mr. C. F. Hazlewood, Deputy Director of Religious Services, TDCJ Rehabilitation Programs Division. Mr. Hazlewood was previously with the Training and Leader Development Division in Correctional Training where he was tasked with overseeing the implementation of the TDCJ Core Values Program.

The TDCJ's mission is to provide public safety, promote positive change in offender behavior, reintegrate offenders into society and assist victims of crime. The Core Values Program provides the guiding principles for how the agency fulfills its mission and has been integrated into all aspects of the agency’s operations.

The Core Values Program was created in 2013. Mr. Hazlewood first started teaching Core Values as a class for correctional staff in 2013 as a class for correctional staff. The positive feedback and impact the class had on staff encouraged the TDCJ to begin providing Core Values Training for all Wardens and Division Directors. They in turn provide the training to staff within their units and divisions. The Core Values Training has also been added as a component of all in-service trainings for supervisors and non-supervisors alike.

The program was developed to provide the TDCJ leadership and staff with a valuable tool, or compass if you will, to assist with how one carries out their professional job duties. Core values are essential to professional development, job performance and are a reflection of who a person or agency is. The attitude with which someone approaches their job has an impact on how they perform their job. Mr. Hazlewood stated, "Behavior is the outward manifestation of an attitude. Attitude is the fuel for behavior." Core values are reflected in our attitude and in our personal lives.

The following definitions of the TDCJ’s core values are borrowed from the July/August 2016 Criminal Justice Connections article:

**Perseverance** is defined as the ability to exercise moral and physical strength to accomplish difficult tasks. A person possessing perseverance is dedicated, patient, determined and able to overcome pain, stress, fatigue and hardship.

**Integrity** means doing what is morally upright and proper at all times, even when no one is looking. Those who display integrity are truthful, fair, conscientious, respectful and trustworthy.

**Courage** is the mental and moral ability to overcome fear, make a decision and take action. A courageous person is confident, bold, resolute and adheres to the highest standards.

**Commitment** is the determination to put one’s duty before one’s self. A committed person is disciplined, consistent and exercises good judgement.

“Core values”, said Mr. Hazlewood, "are an objective guide or standard, to overcome subjective feelings. They help us to operate not on feelings, but on standards. They help provide stability.” An example Mr. Hazlewood shared was that “a supervisor operating under core values will treat staff the same on Monday as on Friday. If staff needs to approach the supervisor with a problem, they are not going to have to worry about what mood the supervisor is in.” Not only does such stability benefit leadership and staff, it also provides structure to incarcerated offenders, thereby fulfilling the TDCJ mission statement.

The Core Values Program promotes a positive culture within the TDCJ and the personal lives of staff. It encourages increased professionalism at all levels. There is much positive feedback from staff who appreciate the standards. Some staff have reported a positive impact on their home and personal lives because of the Core Values Training. It has helped to

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VICTIM SERVICES
While Coping With COVID-19

by Dana Bettger, Bell County District Attorney Victim Services

It was clear from the very beginning when the courts put a stop to jury trials and in person court hearings that we would have to rethink the way we worked with victims. In person meetings with victims of crime and their families was a daily occurrence for us and a vital part of what we do at our Victim Services Division. It was the daily interactions and face to face meetings that provided the much needed support crime victims and families deserved.

The first thing I did was get our Victim Services team together and talk about protocols we had to put in place and how we would implement them to keep everyone safe and still be able to assist and take care of crime victims and their families. We are fortunate enough to have our own Victim Services Division in the DA’s office and that we were able to develop a sanitizing routine for our victim rooms, kitchen, and restroom. We also established a protocol for when we needed to bring victims to the office for face to face meetings and how we would adhere to social distancing rules. We all knew this would take some time to get used to and we had to support each other through this difficult time.

We coordinated with each other so that we all knew when victims were scheduled for in person meetings in the office. This allowed us to ensure that we did not have more than one family in the office at a time. We brought them in through our side door and enforced the social distancing rules which required anyone entering to wear a mask at all times. This was not always easy. Prior to COVID-19, we would be able to give a comforting pat on the back, a hug, or a squeeze of the hand to show victims and their families that we are there for them and encourage them. These may seem like minute gestures, but they are extremely important to victims and families.

When we informed victims of the changes we were implementing, we did not hear any complaints, only understanding and relief. Families were grateful that we were still working and were taking the time to meet with them even if the courts were almost at a standstill. In our Victim Services Division we have a Wall of Tribute as we call it, with pictures of victims we have worked with and for whom justice is so important. On days that we feel down and discouraged, all we have to do is walk into that room and see the reason of why the work we do is important. We also have a lot of art that is displayed on the walls that was painted by members of the Victim Services Division. It brings peace and joy to all of us and we have received a lot of feedback from victims who love to walk down the halls and look at the art displayed. They tell us that it is very calming and relaxing for them and they enjoy it very much.

Just as we thought, “well this is not so bad, we can do this,” there was a surge in COVID-19 cases. Some of our DA staff were exposed to COVID-19. This is when it was decided that more safety measures had to be put in place. This meant we would no longer be able to...
bring victims to the office.

The whole DA’s office was closed to visitors, including police officers and defense attorneys. Our DA’s Office has an open lobby where we could speak to victims if we were wearing a mask, but no one was to come into the Victim Services Division until further notice. That meant we had to rethink our existing protocols and ways of communicating with victims. It was our priority that we provide victims and their families with privacy, dignity, and respect, as we spoke with them about some of the most traumatic moments in their lives, so talking to them in the lobby was not an option for us. District Attorney Henry Garza also implemented a new rotating schedule to reduce the number of staff in the office and the remaining staff would work from home.

I made a rotating work schedule for the Victim Assistance Coordinators (VACs), with one working in the office and the other two from home. This now meant that the VAC in the office would have to do additional tasks that could not be done from home by the other two VACs, in addition to their daily work. When working from home, we had to plan ahead and have a private space in our homes to ensure that conversations and live video chats would not be overheard by others or that the background we were sitting in did not display personal items. It was all the little things we did not think about because they are normal in the office environment and now, we had to adjust and make changes to fit our new environment. We set a standard and it was important to us to be able to work from home while still maintaining the professional and ethical standards that represent the DA’s Office.

When the courts went to using live stream video for court proceedings, we needed to reflect this change in our victim letters, emails and phone calls. We started using Lifesize Cloud Video conferencing software which required us to learn the new technology that we were using to communicate with victims. We had to be able to install, operate and do basic troubleshooting for that technology. Not every victim is tech savvy and so we had to be able to explain and walk victims through the setup of the application and assist them in getting the program to work on their phone or computer so that they would be able to attend court hearings and meetings with us. We also did phone conferences for those victims and families that did not have access to the Internet or did not want to use a video chat.

There have been many changes implemented over the past few months and we are learning new ways to improve and adapt every day. Lifesize Video Meetings have become the norm for us at this point and we use them for our victim meetings with the Assistant DAs and preparing victims for court. On new cases we will have video meetings and do a meet and greet to ensure that the victims and families know the cases are important to us and just because there are limited court hearings, does not mean we have forgotten or put the case aside. We also ensure that when we have a court hearing, be that at a motion to reduce bond, a plea or a sentencing, our victims get to be seen and heard by the court. Ensuring that victims’ rights are observed is a very important part of what we do now more than ever. Throughout all of this, our Assistant DAs have been great in working with victims’ schedules, technical difficulties, and challenges.

Bell County District Attorney’s Office Wall of Tribute

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They are always supportive, making the time to meet with victims, answer questions, and are actively involved with Victim Services.

We are aware that social distancing requirements and stay-at-home orders make it even more difficult for victims of crime to seek the help they need to get through this trying time in their lives. This requires us to take that extra step to ensure that we facilitate access to the help they need. It is more important than ever to work closely with community agencies to make referrals and link victims with the services they require.

I received an email the other day from the mother of a sexual assault victim thanking me for being there for them and helping them. She stated, “Please know that you are a guardian angel for many people, I just hope that you truly do understand that”. I have never seen it that way but was grateful for her kind words. Reading that makes it all worthwhile and it is a reminder how important the work we do truly is, especially now where isolation and access to services can make this process so much harder on victims and families.

Our Victim Services Division here at the Bell County DA’s Office was able to overcome challenges and execute the changes that COVID-19 brought without any hesitation on their part. We could not ask for a more supportive DA than Henry Garza who has always made crime victims and their families a priority in our office.

As many of us come to realize, this pandemic is not just hard on crime victims and families but also on those that support them. Despite our positive attitudes it is more important than ever that we support each other and lift each other’s spirits. As Bell County District Attorney Victim Services Team we have come to know, it truly makes a difference that we have each other’s back especially in this difficult time. Our strength and resolve was put to the test when one of our team members’ spouse died due to COVID-19 related illness. It shook us to the core and made us realize how vulnerable we truly are and that no one is excluded from this pandemic. We talk, we vent, we adapt and overcome, but we always listen to each other and know that we are in this together and we will get through this together.

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increase teamwork within divisions and between the TDCJ divisions. One of the most valuable benefits of the Core Values Program is that it helps to instill the importance of the mission of the TDCJ. It establishes that the mission will be carried out professionally with perseverance, integrity, courage, and commitment.

The TDCJ core values are either posted or painted on some of the walls within the Texas prison units I have visited. When I go into a prison unit, I am humbled by the selfless men and women who go there every day and who operate under these standards. Many may have serious things going on in their personal lives and they have difficult things to deal with on the job that most of us can only imagine. Yet, because of their core values of perseverance, integrity, courage, and commitment, they remain steadfast to keep Texas safe.
Celebrating Mass during Christmas is something Steve Bartley is looking forward to one day in the future. He was born and raised a true Catholic and by the time he was a teenager, he realized he wanted to become a priest. However, his experience in the seminary wasn’t at all what he expected. At 71 years old, he came forward and filed police reports regarding the suffering he endured while in and out of the seminary from the ages of 14 to 25.

Bartley was sexually abused by a priest and two brothers all from the same religious order. He dealt with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse over a 10-year period from three clergymen. Today, he is on the path to healing and recovery. His plans to attend a Catholic Christmas Mass are on hold as he takes a break from all that has happened since he came forward about the abuse. Despite how difficult it was for him to recall each abuse, he was able to push through.

“I know I’m not alone. I know that I’m loved and that is important. I’ve received a lot of help, but I’m just not feeling really energetic about what I need to do next. I just need a break,” he said.

He attended therapy with the church after he told them about the abuse. During his first few sessions, he had a revelation.

“Knowing that this wasn’t my fault, learning that was something that was new to me. It is not me that needs to be blamed because I lived with that for 50 years. I didn’t allow it to happen, but in a way, I did,” he said. “I was a guy, a young kid, and I looked at these men disguised as [clergymen] that took everything away from me. I’m trying to recover still from the damage they caused by being sexual predators.”

He began reading several accounts of other survivors of sexual abuse, and he realized many of them felt the same way he did as they experienced similar things. His counselor helped him see that just because the sexual feeling may have been at times physically pleasing, that didn’t mean it was enjoyable.

“You can get enjoyment from any kind of sexual arousal, male or female, but that doesn’t mean that I looked forward to it. So, I had to learn that. I wasn’t aware of that,” he said.

Going to counseling helped him for some time, but once he stopped going, he began writing a memoir. The writing has helped him recall memories he had long forgotten and has been beneficial to his healing. He is hoping to have his memoir published soon.

Survivors of any kind of abuse may go through a stage of anger that is difficult to move on from according to Bartley. He realized one way he could begin to get past the anger would be if he received a formal apology from one of his abusers. An apology would mean he would be able to heal, or it would at least give him a starting point towards recovery.

Hoping something might be done about one of his abusers, Bartley submitted an online report in July 2020 to the Texas Abuse, Neglect, and Exploitation Reporting System provided by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. He spent days filling out the detailed report of his past abuse. Once he clicked the submit tab, he immediately received a response. The reply indicated his report did not qualify for an investigation. He was unaware that the reporting system would only look into current abuse cases, but he wanted people to be aware his abuser is currently living across the street from children.

“Maybe they saw my birthdate and I did not qualify. My concern that I mentioned in the report, is not so much for me as I am not at risk anymore, but because my last living abuser resides in a retirement home that is right across the street from an elementary and high school,” he said.

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After spending endless hours filling out the report only to be let down in seconds, he said he was overwhelmed with emotion.

“I cried a bit after I read their reply. No one likes to just waste their time, and you put so much into it and then you don’t get anything from it,” he said.

Reliving any kind of trauma can cause painful memories to resurface, and that is something he faced each time he told someone his story. He has not revealed his entire past to everyone he knows, but every time he talks about the pain and suffering he experienced, it’s like he is reliving the abuse all over again.

“I don’t look forward to things that make me miserable and cause suffering, that is why I’m saying I’m just kind of tired. I am ready to move on a bit and recover from all of this,” he said.

In June 2019, Bartley received a considerable settlement from the church he belonged to where the abuses occurred. Since then, he has not heard from the religious order he belonged to. He said not one person has checked in on him to see how he is doing since the settlement.

“I got the settlement and an apology from the church, and I have heard nothing since. Not even a ‘how are you Steve? Just wanted to check in,’” he said. “That is why I’m saying I’m just kind of tired. I am ready to move on a bit and recover from all of this,” he said.

According to Bartley, those who have experienced abuse of any kind might feel they are completely alone, or that they are the only ones experiencing that type of suffering.

“Victims need to know they are not alone and that there are others. That is when the lightbulb went off for me, once I started seeing all these reports of abuse on the news and all of the cover-ups,” he said. “I’m thinking wow there are so many who have come forward! So, why can’t I? And now I can do it.”

In order to take a break from all of the reporting and book writing, he found things to help him get back on track and enjoy his daily routines. He takes his Australian cattle dog, Biscuit, on walks and hikes in the mountains of Colorado Springs. He often rides his motorcycle and tries to do activities outside as often as he can to get some fresh air. He has plans to travel soon and renovate his home to make the most of the rest of his life.

The biggest obstacles he had to overcome in the last year have been tiresome, but he said they have brought him to a place of peace for now. He said that recovery is the acknowledgement that it happened, and it is an apology from the person who inflicted the abuse and suffering. His final hope and need is an apology from the last living priest to get out there. People need to love you unconditionally and without judgment and help you get through it,” he said.

For a long time, he thought what happened to him was his fault and spent years thinking he should have taken action and stopped the clergymen from abusing him. Once he accepted the abuse was not his fault, he said he was able to start his journey toward healing. He said having open communication with other survivors and support groups brought clarity to him and helped him recover from his past trauma.

Bailey Brown is a graduate of Texas State University with a degree in journalism. Her plans to be a professional journalist are in the works as she continues to share the stories of survivors of clergy/nun abuse. She was born and raised in Texas and hopes to continue writing and reporting stories for those who want their voices heard. She loves to read novels in her spare time, drink iced coffee, and listen to indie music.
O
ne of my favorite persons on the planet is an 11-year-old boy. He is a bright, fun-loving, and sweet child. He is also a child that has endured more trauma grief than any one person should, let alone a child.

Each year as the seasons change, without realizing it, that little boy changes a bit, too. His happy-go-lucky spirit fades into a child that wishes to be happier but walks around with an edge that had not been present in the summer. He becomes more irritable and demanding. His ability to tolerate frustrations is lessened, focusing on tasks becomes harder, and he is noticeably more tired.

Not long ago, I was talking to a good friend who said the same thing happens to her each year when the fall air begins to get crisp. She becomes more irritable and sadder. She has to put more effort into staying positive and getting things done.

What these two have in common is each suffered a traumatic loss in October. As autumn begins, my (adult) friend is able to notice her grief responses become more prevalent. As the calendar date gets closer to the anniversary of her husband’s death, she is reminded that is the reason she is re-visiting her grief. She becomes a little more irritable, and she misses him a little more than she normally does.

The little boy responds to the season change with what looks like behavioral changes. He too, becomes irritable. He starts to talk back. He angers easily. He is less tolerant of frustrations. He walks around with what seems like a dark cloud over him. To his teachers, he seems disrespectful and as one teacher put it, “not quite rude, but certainly not respectful.” The worst part is the child feels sad and responsible for the loss he endured seven Octobers ago when he was taken into the state’s custody and put into foster care.

There are some things that are similar in the way the two will process their grief. For starters, they both feel sad and both mourn and have a need for their grief to be expressed and acknowledged. Both need to know there was nothing they could have done to prevent the loss, and they both need to know their feelings are normal. Both need support and time to heal.

While the adult and the child can experience similar traumatic grief, adults and children process grief differently. An adult will learn of a trauma or loss and begin the grieving process, her grief becoming a part of her every-day life. When a child learns about a trauma, they may or may not have a reaction. They may or may not understand that the loss is real or permanent. The loss may seem to not bother them at all. Until it does.

It is common for young children to seem as if nothing has changed. It is not that they are not acknowledging the grief. It is that an adult brain and a child brain are different. An adult can handle more information all at once. A child, depending on the developmental stage at the time of the loss, may only be able to take in a little information at a time causing the grief experience to look very different than an adult. A child may not see it as abnormal for Dad to be in heaven, until they go to school and notice that everyone else seems to have a dad. Then begins a spurt of grief.

The adult grief process is continual. Children tend to grieve intermittently. After a loss, an adult can feel like they are waist deep in the ocean, sometimes overwhelmed with enormous waves of grief. Maybe they fall backwards, lose their footing, find it hard to get their head above water. But eventually, after struggling, they are standing back up in the ocean with the waves lapping around their legs. Maybe those waves push them a bit, but for the most part they can keep moving forward down the shore, although the waves remain present.

Even if the grieving adult is walking out of the water, waves are always there and can still be seen and heard. A child however, processes grief quite differently. Imagine several puddles of water on that beach near the ocean. The child may jump into one puddle of grief, jump out to build a sandcastle, jump into another puddle and then jump out to ask for a snack. Every now and then, they may run straight into the ocean with the waves of grief knocking them down, but then they jump back out to play in the sand. There may even be times when a child is playing that they forget the big ocean of grief because they are focused on the fun task in front of them.

When my friend was told of her loss, the waves of grief hit her hard. She immediately understood the death as permanent. The waves knocked her down and as she began the grieving process, she was able to express her feelings while working to get back on

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her feet again. When the fun-loving boy was hit with the big wave, he did not jump right into grief. He did not understand the loss as permanent. He cried for a moment then was ready to play and smile.

Every now and again, he would jump into a grief puddle. For him to actually verbalize the trauma and the loss he experienced, it took seven years and a lonely quarantine. He cried for two hours after getting a talking-to about his disrespectful behavior over his birthday weekend. It was the first time he talked about the abuse that took place the fall day that ended in his foster care placement. When he had no more tears, he said, “Okay, I feel better, can I play video games now?”

Children do a good job of letting us know when they are finished processing as their brain is only able to digest a little at a time. When we honor that and give them a safe place to process, and we listen to them, they will see us as a safe and understanding person and will continue to come to us for help out of the puddles. Something hard for me to remember is that being there and simply acknowledging the feeling allows the child to figure out on their own how they can feel better.

An adult has the self-awareness to know they are feeling and acting differently and can make changes accordingly. However, the little boy, through no fault of his own, lacks the self-awareness to know why he feels bad. He may not even know where he feels bad. He just is aware that he doesn’t feel right. A child wants to feel better and may have anger outbursts or crying fits of frustration without connecting it to the loss or time of year. It can make it harder to identify the issue if the loss occurs before puberty as a child may even feel like they should not be sad because they do not have any working memory of the deceased. In this case, it is important to remind the child that stories told about them or about their loved ones becomes their own. They become the memories they get to claim.

While an adult has the cognitive development to understand they are struggling, children may begin to struggle, and it is easy to miss the grief due to the bad behaviors. In this case, it is important to discipline bad behaviors but acknowledge the feelings. Try to get to the reasons for the behaviors. When in doubt, wonder out loud. “I wonder if this is because you miss your family?” “I wonder if this is because you wish you were with them?” Children are very quick to tell you if you are right or wrong and oftentimes will give you the correct response when you are incorrect.

Grief is inevitable and, unfortunately, for all ages. There is no time limit to grieving. Once we start the process, waves of grief are ever-present. We learn to live with it. At some point, we all walk through that tunnel of grief whether it be a temporary disruption in our routine, a separation from friends or family, a relationship change, a death, or a loss of something we care about.

Understanding and acknowledging that while grief feelings may be similar, adults and children, everyone processes and expresses their grief differently. We must remember that is okay. So as a September ends, I will check on my friend a little more often. I will tell her I am thinking about her. Remembering that bringing up the deceased doesn’t remind her of her loss because she may not be in the ocean of grief right now, but only a step away.

It is also time for me to remind that little boy that he may be having a hard time getting along with peers at school and not focusing on schoolwork as well, because October is a hard month for him. When he has a harder time sleeping and wakes me in the middle of the night, perhaps I will just lie with him and tell him it’s okay to remember, it’s okay to miss and love the people we have lost. Everyone big and small needs to know that grief is hard. They need to know they are supported whether they are in the ocean or standing in a puddle.

Stephanie Williams, LPC and therapy dog, Timber.
MIND AND BODY

My Unexpected and Unplanned Road to Resiliency

by Mike Jones, Texas Crime Victim Clearinghouse

I’ve always been pretty active. In fact, when I was young – from around eight to thirteen years old – most people would probably say I was hyperactive (just ask anyone who lived with me and shared the same walls that I bounced off of)!

When I moved to Austin to go to school in 1986, I was still really active. I worked at a grocery store in south Austin, played on a local men’s soccer team, and refereed for the area youth and adult leagues, as well as the regional college and semi-professional leagues, indoor and out, all while carrying a full load of classes at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos.

After graduating from college, I started working full-time and still kept up the soccer activity. I was pretty fit, but back then I smoked cigarettes. Yuck, I know! I smoked my last cigarette on April 30, 1993. I stayed fit even during the rehab after a few knee surgeries, which included mitigating the effects of arthritis and pain due to a bad surgery on the left and an ACL replacement on the right. Ultimately, the left knee got so bad, it had to be replaced. I got a brand-new, store-bought knee in 2006.

That fitted shirt
The knee replacement surgery had been difficult to recover from, and with the fake knee I was forbidden from running or playing or refereeing soccer. Pretty soon I was no longer physically fit or active in any way, but the effects of that had not dawned on me yet. One day, I was training correctional staff on victim rights and sensitivity with work colleagues, Mark Odom and Shania Springer, in Huntsville. Shania took a photo of me during my part of the presentation. It was a side shot. To make matters worse, I was wearing a fitted dress shirt. To me, the fact that I was at least 25 or 30 pounds overweight wasn’t the worst part; the image of the shape of my body in that fitted shirt in that photo became my guiding motivation to get fit. But I didn’t know how to do that; I had never developed a fitness routine. I had always stayed fit by just staying active.

To lose weight, I downloaded a calorie tracking app to my cell phone and started recording everything I ate. My wife and I started doing P90 exercises together. I graduated to P90x after a few weeks, and started bicycle riding, since I am forever restricted from running due to the fake knee. Cycling can be remarkable exercise for anyone with knee issues, including fake knees. Most cycling provides beneficial aerobic and anaerobic exercise, but at times it can become fairly intense, especially when it is windy or hilly.

At my peak fitness level, my weekly exercise routine was: 28 miles of cycling on Monday and Wednesday, 40 miles on Saturday; upper body weights and abs/core on Tuesday and Thursday; and yoga on Friday evening. I took Sundays off.

Although I was proud to have lost over 20 pounds (from 190 pounds to 167), I was amazed at the shape of my body, not just the look of it but how it worked! I also learned how to eat well. Although I started using the app to count calories and lose weight, the eye-opening bonus was learning how much sugar, salt, fat, and cholesterol I had been eating before. I no longer count calories on an app, but I do take care to carefully limit my intake of sugar, salt, fat, and bad cholesterol.

I do not exercise like I used to, but I still stay busy and maintain a healthy diet and exercise routine. As a result of how COVID has changed our lives recently, I unintentionally learned a new exercise routine: walking.

Like a lot of people, I started working from home. I found myself sitting in my desk chair pretty much all day. After I got off at four o’clock, I would go to the grocery store, get stuff to fix for dinner, then settle on the couch with my iPad after dinner. Except for challenging my brain a little with a daily online crossword puzzle, most of that routine was doing me little good. So, I started walking the road in front of my house down to Darden Hill Road and back. I started walking just to get fresh air, not to lose weight, although I was surprised to learn that I had reached 195 pounds at this time – I’m 5’8”. I was struggling with some depression as well. Among other things, I think my neighbor’s

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Heading off on a Hill County bike ride, May 2014

suicide had a lot to do with that. One day, I decided to take a left at Darden Hill Road and walk a bit further. I live in a hilly, rural area, and the left turn at the Darden Hill Road presents up and down hills and culminates in a mile-long uphill walk.

Walking Darden Hill Road is amazing physical fitness. It is mostly aerobic exercise and the heart and lungs are stressed but in a nice groove. All of my muscles are working, keeping me at pace and balanced on an uneven road. Heading up the mile-long hill – as well as many of the smaller yet steeper hills – makes the walking anaerobic. The large muscles are working hard, and the lungs and heart are trying to keep blood and oxygen flowing to them. My sitting heart rate is 75 to 78 beats per minute. During the aerobic walking stretches my heart rate ranges between 120 to 135 bpm. At the top of Darden Hill, it can reach 150. (On a bicycle, my heart rate can reach 200 bpm.)

After a couple of months, I went back to working at the office. There still was no traffic, but also no lunchtime walks. I started walking every evening after the temperature dips below 100 degrees. My current routine includes walking 45 minutes or so (three miles) on weekday evenings, sometimes while holding back energetic dogs, and an hour and 20 minutes or so (five miles) on weekends.

I also got a promotion at work, and part of my new job includes developing a resiliency training module for our Texas Victim Assistance Training (TVAT) online program. Before I started walking, stress, the effects of vicarious trauma, as well as the negative personal events, had me pretty depressed. I didn’t really care about much. Even in the middle of vigorously planning, researching, and developing a resiliency curriculum, it hadn’t occurred to me that I could have used this knowledge to help myself. I wasn’t practicing what I was preaching. Then, a few small but profound events occurred that would change everything.

Every couple of weeks we have staff meetings at work. Hosted by our hotline supervisor, Byron Bullock, we coagulate* with each other and discuss any updates or issues with our Integrated Victim Services System (IVSS), victim notification and other victim-related topics, (the fictional) Mrs. Peterbaum, and the Great Migration of 2019* (when we moved our notification system to IVSS). At the end of these meetings, we often watch a motivational TEDx Talk that Byron has selected for us. The last two have been life-altering for me. The first TEDx Talk was about neuroplasticity of the brain and the second was about character traits of resilient people.

In the first TEDx Talk, “How mindfulness changes the emotional life of our brains,” Richard J. Davidson, PhD mentions how the Dalai Lama had, “challenged [him] to use the same tools of modern neuroscience to study kindness and compassion in addition to studying anxiety and fear.” Dr. Davidson goes on to discuss neuroplasticity and how our brains are constantly being shaped by the forces that surround us. Most of the time we are not aware of or have much control over those forces. In fact, according to Dr. Davidson, “47 percent of time, the average American adult is not paying attention to what they are doing.”

According to Davidson, many American adults also suffer from some level of loneliness, even though we are so “connected.” He says that serious

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The top of Darden Hill Road is 2 1/4 miles from my front door.
depression among Americans is on the rise, especially among women and adolescent females. Since 2000, adolescent suicides have more than doubled. Also, as Americans we seemed to have lost the sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. In general, we are not thriving, but Dr. Davidsons insists we could be. “The wiring in our brains is not fixed; it’s adaptable. And we can harness the power of neuroplasticity to change our brain.”

This TEDx Talk led me to look for more information about neuroplasticity, so I purchased a book titled, *The Brain’s Way of Healing* by Norman Doidge, MD. Dr. Doidge, a psychiatrist, psychoanalyst, and researcher, spends a lot of time at the beginning of the book writing about a man named, John Pepper. Pepper had severe Parkinson’s, but he mitigated most of the debilitating symptoms and effects by fast walking. When he had been unable to walk, after a surgery for example, the Parkinson’s came back in full force. Once he was able to walk again, the symptoms subsided. Hmmm. Walking?

**Hunt the good stuff**

The other TEDx Talk, “The three secrets of resilient people,” by Dr. Lucy Hone has proven to be the biggest surprise and most profound influence for my own recovery and resiliency. Dr. Hone, from Christchurch, New Zealand, spent time in the United States training our military about resiliency. In the TEDx Talk, she mentions the philosophy and culture of, “hunt the good stuff.” Hunt the good stuff is part of a comprehensive resiliency program the US military has developed for its members and their families. When you hunt the good stuff, you concentrate on optimism by identifying things that went well in your day; reflecting on why each good thing happened, what each good thing means to you, and what you can do tomorrow to enable more good things; and sharing your experiences of this with someone close to you.

After she returned home to New Zealand, Dr. Hone began to work with people affected by the 2011 earthquake. Soon after, her 12-year-old daughter was killed in a car crash, and Dr. Hone found herself desperately trying to practice what she had been teaching others to do for a long time.

One of Dr. Hone’s “secrets” is that resilient people accept that bad things happen to everyone. Those bad things come in a monumental gamut of degrees. Suffering is a part of life. Resilient people are very good at knowing when and where to apply their efforts and attention, realistically appraising situations, focusing on the things they can change, and accepting those they cannot change.

These days we are inundated with negative pressures. Most of these threats we have little control over. The negative people and things in my life that I had no control over had been occupying most of my mind much of the time. Everything seemed to be a setback, no matter how I tried to approach it. Consequently, not much in my life meant much to me at the time, and the negative mind had created a negative body.

When I walk up and down Darden Hill Road, I leave my cellphone at home. I try to tune into the natural beauty that is all around me, and I’m also concentrating on what my body is doing and maybe telling me. There are a lot of things to see and encounter on a narrow, two-lane country road, including wildlife and the occasional oncoming traffic.

*Byronisms*

“*We so often activate a physiological system that has evolved for responding to acute physical emergencies, but we turn it on for months on end ...*”

**Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers,**
Robert M. Sapolsky

Darden Hill heading west and towards home.
I didn’t start walking because I was worried about a potential onset of Parkinson’s or dementia; I just wanted some fresh air. However, I began to notice that while I was walking, I felt better. No part of the body can move without affecting all of the others, and the mind and the body are always connected. Physically, I have seen the benefits of walking, of course, but I also feel more alert and aware. When I started, I wasn’t thinking about what my brain or neurons were doing or what was going on in my hippocampus and amygdala. However, many studies suggest that exercise, mostly aerobic exercise, is helpful in improving cognitive functioning in adults, namely memory, attention, processing speed, and ability to form and act on plans.

**Mind and body**

I cannot disregard the conspicuous timing of stumbling upon this new or relearned information, though. Dr. Davidson brought my attention to neuroplasticity, depression, meaning, and purpose. Dr. Doidge led me to understand in a basic, straightforward way, how my mind and body are connected, especially during my walks. Dr. Hone convinced me to concentrate on how I look at optimism and resiliency, which becomes my prime motivation during my walks.

While walking, I hunt the good stuff; I try to think about the positive things that have occurred over the last few days, and what I’m looking forward to for the days ahead. I think about things I’m grateful for – something I was not doing when I was depressed. I assess the negative people and situations in my life that I cannot control and assign them to the back burner, so to speak. I think about things I’m looking forward to at work for the coming week.

All of this is keeping my brain at work, managing the ever-changing physical, mental, and emotional projects that my body is working on during the walk. When I get home, my body may be tired, but I feel alert and energized.

Waking up in the middle of the night is not an uncommon event. A friend’s dad called it, “going into committee.” My period of nighttime restlessness is usually 2:15 to 2:30 am. While I was depressed, I would wake up and immediately begin to worry about the things that I was depressed and stressed about (and the fact that I was awake at 2:30!). Then I would stay awake the rest of the night; I couldn’t shut down my mind. This, of course, kept me tired all the time. You would think that a person this tired would be able to sleep, but not so. These days, I still occasionally wake up in the middle of the night, but now I don’t seem to dwell on those negative things. I purposely think about what I’m looking forward to the next day, like writing this article. I go back to sleep pretty quickly. Tired body, unstressed mind.

Like I said, I have always been pretty active. I have also never really acted my age. When I was young, that may have been viewed as a maturity issue, a character flaw, or a negative idiosyncrasy. These days, not acting my age has become an objective! If you are struggling with stress or anxiety, I encourage you to hunt the good stuff; to work to keep your body and your mind connected, active, and challenged; to strive to be grateful for what you have and to place optimism, hope, and the things you can control in front of negativity and those things you cannot.

Unfortunately, I see a lot of litter while walking Darden Hill Road. On one of my walks, I found this small wooden heart. For me, the symbolism is profound. First, I found it on the road that leads to my favorite place, our little house that used to be in the country. (I found the house by mistake when I ended up on Darden Hill Road while motorcycle riding years ago.) The heart also represents that, by walking this road and staying aware of my heart rate, I am keeping my body physically fit. And, since many cultures and traditions see the heart as the center of emotional health, I am maintaining my own emotional health when I hunt the good stuff.
Vicarious
by Mike Jones

Fragments of your pain become mine to bear

On your unwanted journey you crossed my path
How am I here? This day, this time, with you?
By whose hand? By what plan?
Let me take just some of your burden

Willful tears are not unwelcomed
Collected and kept with the others

Though I seem fragile at times
This honor has made me stronger

NATIONAL VICTIM
Awareness Dates

December 2020

National Impaired Driving Prevention Month
Two of the most celebrated dates in December – Christmas Eve and New Year’s Eve – are also among the most dangerous. Every day, almost 30 people in the United States die in drunk-driving crashes — that’s one person every 50 minutes. These deaths have fallen by a third in the last three decades, however, drunk-driving crashes claim more than 10,000 lives per year. That is why Mothers Against Drunk Driving® (MADD) is teaming up with law enforcement agencies across the country throughout the month of December, which has been recognized as National Impaired Driving Prevention Month for the 39th consecutive year. For more information, visit https://www.madd.org/december-is-national-impaired-driving-prevention-month/.

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January 2021

National Stalking Awareness Month
National Stalking Awareness Month, which is observed each January, is a time to raise awareness about the warning signs of stalking and promote ways people can stay safe if they believe they have a stalker. Throughout this month, we encourage you to learn, take action, and share information to prevent and end stalking in your community. For more information, visit https://www.stalkingawareness.org

National Law Enforcement Appreciation Day (L.E.A.D.)
On January 9, 2021, partnering organizations in support of law enforcement officers nationwide will promote National L.E.A.D. In light of recent negativity directed toward law enforcement nationally, there is a need to show law enforcement officers that our citizens recognize the difficult and sometimes impossible career they have chosen, in public service to us all. For more information, visit https://www.concernsofpolicesurvivors.org/lead.

National Human Trafficking Awareness Day
National Human Trafficking Awareness Day on January 11th raises awareness of the persistent issue of human trafficking. Though the entire month of January has already been recognized as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, this day is specifically dedicated to awareness and prevention of the illegal practice. This holiday is also separate from the World Day Against Trafficking Persons, as established by the United Nations. Since the Senate established this day of observance in 2007, it has drawn massive public support from individual donations to government-organized events. The horrific injustice of human trafficking can affect people of any race and background, and on this day we are all called to fight human trafficking wherever it exists. For more information, visit https://nationaltoday.com/national-human-trafficking-awareness-day/.

Deadlines for articles and other information:
December 23, 2020 for March 2021/April 2021 issue

Please Note: You may access the publication at the TDCJ VSD website by going to tdcj.texas.gov/publications/victim_informer_newsletter.html. If you wish, we will notify you via email each time The Victim’s Informer becomes available on the TDCJ VSD website and provide an electronic link to The Victim’s Informer.

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Angie McCown, Director
Texas Department of Criminal Justice
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87th Legislative Session
begins January 12, 2021
and ends May 31, 2021.
Save the Dates!

Texas Advanced Academy for Victim Assistance

Presented Virtually

Wednesdays, March 24-May 5, 2021

Who should attend? The academy content is designed for current and aspiring program managers/supervisors and is recommended for victim service providers from both systems-based and community-based programs. Participants should have at least three years of experience as a victim service provider.

Topics of this real world, best practices academy include:

Leadership • Program Management • Trauma-Informed Supervision

Strategic Funding • Communication Skills • Volunteer Management

Career Planning • OVC Program Standards

Applications will open January 4, 2021 at www.bxvsa.org. The Academy will be limited to 60 participants.

Registration fees of $250 for TVSA members and $275 for non-members include up to 17 hours of Social Work, LPC, or LMFT CEUs (3 Ethics).

For additional information or questions please email director@bxvsa.org