

A year after my mother's death, I found my way back with a grief retreat

I thought I would have been prepared for her passing, but I was not. This dull ache of uncertainty made me think I might need help.



A grief retreat like the ones organized by Danielle Kitts of Lawrenceville's faith-based Rooted in Hope organization can help those who have lost a loved one understand their grief and depression so that they can better process their loss. (Jacob Wackerhausen/Getty Images)

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By [Kathryn Whitbourne](#)

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It has been one year since my mother died. She'd been sick with cancer for five years. In that time span, she went through surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, another round of chemotherapy and proton treatment. Finally, the doctors said they could do nothing further. This was January 2024.

For the next 11 months she mostly lay on a lounge chair on a veranda in our home in Jamaica or on a sofa with a day nurse. She was heavily dosed with strong opiates. Her immediate family members clashed over her care: Should she be kept alive under any circumstances and in any condition or left to live out her remaining days, maybe for a

shorter period, but more alert and able to communicate and spend time with her loved ones?

She grew thinner and thinner. She thought she was somewhere else. She talked often of going home, which apparently was not the home she had lived in for 40 years, or even a heavenly home, but seemed to be the home of her childhood in a rural part of Jamaica.

I had thought we'd have time for some "meaningful conversations," but most of the time she was too heavily medicated for that.



Kathryn Whitbourne (right) and her mother, Fay, at Swan Coach House in Atlanta on Mother's Day 2018. (Courtesy)

Despite her being sick for so long, I was still unprepared for her passing. I was standing by her bed at the hospital (a place she had not wanted to go) when she took her last breath. It took a minute for her family to realize she had gone. After that came the tears, the anger, the paperwork.

I was not prepared. I thought I would have been, but I was not.

Seven months later I was still not “handling” this well, whatever that means. I was a grown woman over 60, it was not like when I lost my father at 29 from a gunshot wound. She was in her 80s, we knew this was going to come eventually. And still. It was this uncertainty, this dull ache, that made me think I might need help.

I do not come from a family where therapy is done. We put things aside (or stuff them down) and keep it moving, somehow. But this felt different.

I started looking for some kind of grief retreat. I didn’t exactly know what I was looking for when I was Googling “grief retreat Georgia,” but I came across [Rooted in Hope](#), which runs grief retreats in the North Georgia mountains. It’s a faith-based organization run by Danielle Kitts.

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I asked my sisters if they wanted to come. One said no, the other agreed warily.

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The questions piled up. Where were we going? What would happen? Would everyone else be just boo-hooing and not angry as well? We’d find out.

Understanding grief and depression

“Breathe,” Danielle said. This was the first lesson. We often forget to breathe.

It’s just three of us at this retreat, plus Danielle and her husband. The other participant couldn’t get the time off work to come. We are all grieving our mothers.

We start off each day of the three days with breathing exercises and some movement. Then comes the writing part.

What is grief? I write what she tells me. “Grief is a feeling that won’t go away. It is work. It won’t be cured or fixed.”

“Why are you here?” Truthfully, I don’t really know exactly but I write, “To try and decipher what God is saying to me.”

We make a timeline of all the losses in our life, whether of people, jobs or other things. It’s a long list.

What is depression? I write, “Depression is a man with a hat and a suit like from a 1940s movie. He comes in and takes up a chair before you ask him to come in. He’s comfortable because he’s been there before.”

One day we talk about how we feel, that our mothers died and we could not help them, how some of the men in their lives let them down, let us down. Anger is easier to feel than sadness or pain. I joke that revenge is No. 3 on the five stages of grief.

One day Danielle talks about the science behind grief — how tears release opioids in the body to help us deal with pain.

In a better place now

We write down some things we can to cope with the pain and loss: writing in a journal, calling a friend, walking in nature, even getting a nap.

The last day, we write letters to our loved ones.

We read them aloud before putting them in the firepit to be burned.

In mine, I tell my mother I am sorry that she didn’t die at home like she wanted, that she died in a hospital with all kinds of tubes in her, that I wish I could call her up and tell her what to watch on TV or help her with some computer thingy she doesn’t understand.

I copy the letter before it’s burned so I can remember what I wrote.

To be able to sit with your feelings for even just a weekend feels like a luxury you didn’t actually want but really needed. We all have our meals together and talk and laugh, which lightens the mood.

It’s been a few months since the grief retreat. As Danielle said, it doesn’t mean

Everything is over in one weekend, but I do feel that I’m in a better place than before.

About the Author



Kathryn Whitbourne

Kathryn is a quality control editor at the AJC. She was previously a senior editor and writer with HowStuffWorks.com and a freelance writer with WebMD. She has a communications degree from Cornell University and was lucky enough to have been born in Jamaica.