

THE GRAPEVINE

North Shore Caregivers Newsletter



FEATURED STORY

"Christmas Past, Christmas Present: Creating memories and staying sane"
by Catherine Bryson

Christmas Past, Christmas Present: Creating memories and staying sane

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Remember that old Scrooge movie with Alastair Sim? Seems like now I am being haunted by memories of Christmases past. In any case, what it boils down to is that 'the holidays' bring up a lot of somewhat 'tricky' emotions. But it's not all bad, and there is still some joy to be found, if only in the 'little things.' Let this article be your guide towards 'making memories' and staying sane this Christmas. (Excuse me if you celebrate Hannukah or Kwanza.)

Part I: Excerpt from December 2024 Journal

Christmas: all the build-up, all the anticipation, and often when it comes, it's not quite what you would have hoped. (Incidentally, you could say the same thing when you reflect on your life). Not as glitzy, not as hedonistic, not as old-fashioned, not as epicurean etc. etc. In short, Christmas fails to live up to your expectations once again.

Instead, why not appreciate the glitz, but not fall hopelessly under its spell. Appreciate the treats, but not as an excuse for a 'sugar avalanche.' Just, okay, Christmas: A day we get to hang out with friends and family, a day we get to eat nice food, a day we express our love through thoughtful gifts. That is all. And most importantly, a day we wish for peace on Earth.



Remember the TV show from the 1970s, 'Little House on the Prairie'? The show was based on the book by Laura Ingalls Wilder. In the book, the little girl, Laura, describes a typical Christmas on the prairie in the 1800s. She would get excited about an orange in her stocking, the same way children today might get excited about getting a Nintendo game. Maybe, in this Age of Entitlement, we might discover a hidden message in that orange.

Part II: Help for Caregiving During the Holidays

This Christmas, in truth, you have lots of options. You could:

- a) Go all out: Tree, presents, turkey, stockings...
- b) Skip it entirely (Spend Christmas in your pjs watching Netflix and eating caramel popcorn)
- c) Do a 'mini' version of it
- d) 'Hitch a ride' on someone else's Christmas, and not do much yourself
- e) None of the above

Personally, I choose Option 'C'. Which one will you choose?

Take your pick.

However, Christmas can involve some significant challenges for caregivers, so I will discuss that now, before moving on to the more 'jolly' topic of nostalgia. Think of it as 'eating your broccoli' before the dessert course.



As I've mentioned, Christmas often brings with it a certain sadness or grief for what has been lost. I recently attended a free webinar hosted by the Alzheimer Society of Toronto (see link below). The host talked about a phenomenon called 'paradoxical thinking', which is a mix of two contrasting emotions, in this case; both joy and sadness.

In those times when you do go deeper, you may need some downtime to yourself to take a few calming breaths and just 'sit' with the feelings, whatever comes up. L. Poole, author of: 'Six Tips for Managing Grief During the Holidays', advises us to 'lean into the sadness.' This is an excellent point: namely, in order to heal, you first have to feel. It was Mel from the NSCR Bereavement Support Group (for more information, see

below), who told me about this great TED talk on grief, in which the presenter Julia Samuel pretty much says the same thing. That said, sometimes some healthy distraction, like an uplifting book or movie, is just the thing. Or perhaps, a coffee outing with a friend.

In addition, if you are caring for someone with dementia over the holidays, ensure that they have a nice, quiet place to sit and just 'be.' Away from the hustle and bustle or noise of young grandchildren. Also, this might be just the right time to pull out the old family photo album and reminisce.

If there's a lull in the hullabaloo, then take time to unplug and de-stress. If you're dealing with burnout issues (as so many of us are) check out the new book by compassion expert Kirstin Neff in the Resources below.

Part III: Nostalgia: A Way to Navigate Difficult Feelings

Which segways very nicely into the topic of nostalgia. 'Nostalgia' is a 300-year-old word that originally meant 'homesickness.' It is now known as a longing for aspects of a person's lived past, inevitably bittersweet in nature. Note that previously, nostalgia was judged as 'escapist' and regressive. This is no longer the case. There is now hard scientific evidence that nostalgia is a legitimate evidence-based way to navigate painful feelings or even anxiety about the future.

Sharing memories can bring you together and it doesn't just have to be life experiences. For example, you could bake bread together (or an old family shortbread recipe), and the aroma of freshly baked bread or cookies might evoke pleasant memories for you and your loved one.

Or else, you could play special music to your loved one that reminds him/her about their childhood or youth, or maybe a song that was playing when they met their spouse. Did you know for instance that in spite of a diagnosis of dementia, memory for music remains intact? It is one of the most fascinating and encouraging facts about dementia, to my mind at least.

Also, if your loved one experiences a deep emotion, such as sadness or loss, or joy; the capacity to feel remains intact even in those with dementia.

And finally, savour those memories, so that years later you can re-experience that special moment when you and your loved one sang an old sentimental tune together one night, as the sound of Christmas music wafts in the cool winter air and creates one of those special timeless moments that you will remember for the rest of your life. Personally, I have a pleasant memory of every Christmas watching the movie Notting Hill (with Hugh Grant), with my father.

Part III: Nostalgia: A Way to Navigate Difficult Feelings

Isn't there a saying that our brains are more like Teflon for pleasant memories and the opposite for unpleasant ones? Okay, yes, Christmas is not always joyful. Sometimes, it can be stressful (for example: if you are travelling with a person who has dementia over the holidays, or else someone you love suddenly falls ill). But...

Life is so short—and to spend it feeling miserable all the time, to my way of thinking at least, seems a terrible waste of a human life, which, after all, is quite a precious thing and not to be squandered. Is it

not a remarkable thing that you now inhabit a human body on planet Earth, which, we suspect, is the only planet in the universe that supports life forms?

Sometimes, truly, seeing the big picture helps.

And, if anything else, the holiday season can bring a little variety into the rather Groundhog Day movie-like sameness. Remember that movie, starring Bill Murray? In many ways, it has become the metaphor for my life in seniordom. Which is not entirely a bad way to be. Boredom isn't entirely a bad thing, in and of itself.

And I am also reminded of that line in the movie where the actress says: "Life's a banquet but most poor devils are starving to death."

So...this Christmas, I invite you all to create some memories. "Feliz Navidad to you all!" And I will see you in 2025!

Now, a few lines of 2021 Xmas NSCR Grapevine poem ('Christmas Un-Wrapped'):

This year
The darkness was vanquished
By a simple string
Of soft white lights
Woven around the deck railing
Giving off an incandescent
Brightness
A divine light
Through the dark pool
Of night...

I'd like to dedicate this article to my late father Dr. David Morrow Bryson who passed away in the night last year on Boxing Day. He was a blessed source of divine light in a dark time. May his incredible lightness of being live on. And on...

I hope you have enjoyed this article as much as I have enjoyed writing it. If you care to give me feedback, it would be very welcome. Simply email Caregiver Support Program Coordinator Vic Gailiunas at the email address below. Thank you for your time and support. Stay warm. Stay dry and stay safe this holiday season.

Note on Image: St. Augustine's Anglican Church Vancouver Christmas market 2024. Cartoon from: Anglican Journal

Resources

'Mindful Self-Compassion for Burnout: Tools to Help You Heal and Recharge When You're Wrung Out by Stress' (2024) by Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer. (Available at Amazon.ca for \$20)

To give feedback on this article or to find out more about the NSCR (North Shore Community Resources) Bereavement Support Group

Contact: NSCR Caregiver Support Program Coordinator Vic Gailiunas at: Vic.Gailiunas@nscr.ca

Alzheimer Society of Toronto Free Webinars: <https://www.alzeducate.ca>

Staying Sane Over the Holidays Link: <https://themontfortgroup.com/5-ways-to-stay-sane-over-the-holidays>

Nostalgia Info:

Clay Routledge: 'The Surprising Powers of Nostalgia' Dec 2023 <https://resources.soundstrue.com>
Mr. Routledge wrote:

'Past Forward: How Nostalgia Can Help You Live a More Meaningful Life'

Other Nostalgia Link: <https://apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/nostalgia#>

How to Make Memory Books:

<https://www.blurb.com/blog/15-memory-book-ideas/>

Grief:

'Six Tips for Managing Grief During the Holidays' by L. Poole (2018)

<https://themontfortgroup.com/managing-grief/>

More on Grief:

See You Tube video

'The Paradox of Grief' by Julia Samuel (2023)

(Recommended by Mel, NSCR Bereavement Support Group Facilitator)

David Kessler: Expert on Grief

Short videos on managing grief

<https://grief.com/grief-videos>

Events Calendar

JANUARY

- Thurs 02** **Men's Support Group Meeting** (In Person) **10:30 AM - 12:30 AM**
- Tues 07** **Caregiver Support Group Meeting** (Zoom) **6:30 PM - 8:30 PM**
- Wed 08** **Korean Group Meeting** (In Person) **2:00 PM - 4:00 PM**
- Mon 20** **Persian Group Meeting** (Zoom) **6:00 PM - 8:00 PM**
- Tues 14** **Bereavement Support Group Meeting** (In Person and Zoom) **6:00 PM - 8:00 PM**

FEBRUARY

- Tues 04** **Caregiver Support Group Meeting** (In Person & Zoom) **6:30 PM - 8:30 PM**
- Thurs 06** **Men's Support Group Meeting** (In Person) **10:30 AM - 12:30 PM**
- Tues 11** **Bereavement Group Coffee Social - no agenda** (In Person) **11:00 AM - 12:30 PM**
- Wed 12** **Korean Group Meeting** (In Person) **2:00 PM - 4:00 PM**
- Mon 17** **Persian Group Meeting** (In Person) **6:00 PM - 8:00 PM**

Senior Moment? Or Something More Serious?

How to Tell the Difference

By Catherine Bryson

It was an ordinary weekend and my sister was over for lunch with my parents. My father was using the coffee machine, but he kept making mistakes and breaking the little glass cups we used for espresso coffee. It was an Italian espresso maker, but honestly not very complicated. Something tweaked in my caregiver's brain: something said: "Uh-oh. Something is not quite right." (It is indeed interesting how sometimes the sensitivity required for creativity can often help in other areas of one's life. Though it is, of course, a mixed blessing.)

It was a 'Madame Clavel' moment. You know, the Headmistress in the children's book 'Madeline' who wakes up bolt upright in her bed and utters those famous words: "Something is not right!" And you know what? She was right. Something was wrong.

Another part of me said: "Oh, it's nothing. Nothing to worry about."

But still, that tiny worried part of me held on. And on...Until about 10 years later, when my father began waking up in the middle of the night and seeing things that weren't there.

So, then. I knew.

I just knew.

And a few weeks later, my father and I went to the Gerontologist and the diagnosis was confirmed. Dementia. And my siblings said how right I was all along to think that my father had symptoms of dementia. My hunch was correct, as 'hunches' so often are, but our rational brains won't accept those hunches as real. And I'm here to say to you now: Trust your hunches. It is essential as a caregiver that you trust your intuition. It is your golden guide through the maze of eldercare. Or indeed, any aspect of your life, be it work or relationships or finances.

But oh, god. And then the journey begins. Really begins. Those '36-hour' days you've all heard about. And because you went through it with your parents, you start



to notice your own particular 'senior moments.' And you wonder: 'Is this happening to me too?'

So, this post is how YOU can learn to tell the difference between a 'senior moment' and something that may indicate a diagnosis of dementia.

But first, what is a 'senior moment'?

In the blog post: 'Senior moments vs onset of dementia' (see link in Resources below), the concept 'senior moments' is defined as: 'A polite way of saying an older person had a moment of forgetfulness or confusion attributed to advanced age.'

As the blog post maintains, there is a BIG difference between isolated 'senior moments' and early signs of dementia. However, we can all use a reminder that many of the risks of dementia are modifiable, so it is essential to bear in mind the following:

- Exercise, stay active
- Stay sociable
- Explore Mediterranean and MIND diets
- Manage stress effectively
- Ensure adequate sleep
- Follow a routine
- Schedule regular doctor visits

Note the following...

Possible Signs of Dementia:

1. Frequent memory lapses
2. Difficulty with ordinary tasks like making a cup of coffee (remember my father and the espresso?) or preparing a meal (following simple steps)
3. Disorientation: Getting lost on a regular route, or driving somewhere but then forgetting why.
4. Poor judgement. One bad decision, not to worry, but if frequent (such as constantly falling for common scams) then possibly look for an evaluation.
5. Crossing streets dangerously
6. Not dressing appropriately (going out in the winter in a t-shirt and flip-flops).
7. Frequent language problems such as forgetting the word for 'spoon'. (but see below for important point when it comes to forgetting vocabulary)
8. Difficulty managing affairs such as paying bills or filling out forms
9. Poor spatial awareness - for example, difficulty judging distance when parking

10. Constantly misplacing things (however, keep in mind that some folks have always been, and will always be, 'absent-minded professors')
11. Strange behavior or sudden changes in mood
12. Loss of initiative



Please note that symptoms of dementia can occur with certain illnesses or conditions such as:

Brain tumours, nutritional deficiencies, and depression Strokes can also cause dementia-like symptoms.

To reiterate, forgetting your PIN once in a while is a senior moment, and a normal part of aging. Or even forgetting the word for 'fork' every now and then.

BUT

Forgetting what a fork is used for **IS** cause for concern and an evaluation might be required by a health professional or gerontologist. As an interim step, consider giving your loved one one of those simple tests of cognitive decline (similar to an online hearing test) that can easily be found online and if, once again, results seem abnormal then you should be even more convinced about calling that doctor (and bring along the results of the test with you). The tests all issue a caveat saying that these tests **IN NO WAY** replace the expertise of a professional, so you will still have to make that (dreaded) phone call.

And sad to say, that person requiring that evaluation might be your spouse or even in some cases, you. In any case, advocating on behalf of your loved one, or yourself, is crucial for a good outcome. Bear in mind also that early diagnosis is key and early detection can mean that helpful medications can be taken early and thus delay the progression of the disease, and thus increase the number of years of quality of life. Sadly, in many cases the diagnosis only comes after several years have passed and is thus 'too late' for early intervention (which means that that phone call is even more crucial, painful though it is.)

I'd like to wrap up this post with a powerful poem:

**“Emily Dickinson, I’m Somebody”
by Frances H. Kakugawa**

If I could speak, this is what
My voice would say:

Do not let this thief scare you away.
Do not let this thief intimidate you
Into thinking I’m no longer here.

When you see me, tell me quickly
Who you are.
Do not ask me, “Do you know me?”
Help me retain my own dignity
By not forcing me to say,
“No, I don’t know who you are.”
Save my face by greeting me
With your name even if the thief
Has stolen all that from me.

It shames me to such indignities
To know I do not know you.
Help me in this game of
Pretension That this thief has
Not stolen
Your name from me.

My words have all forsaken me.
My thoughts are all gone.
But do not let this thief
Forsake you from me.
Speak to me I am still here.
I understand hugs and smiles
And loving kindness.
Speak to me and not around me.
I am not she or her or even a room
Number.

I am still here.
When I soil my clothing,
Or do something absurd
Do not tell me, “Why didn’t you?”
If I could I would

I know I have turned
Into a monstrous baby,
If I could, I would not allow this thief
To let you live and see
What it has stolen from me.

I know my repeated questions
Are like a record player gone bad,
But my words are gone
And this is the only way I know
To make contact with you.
It is my sole way of saying
Yes, I know why you are here.
This thief has stolen
Everything else.
Except for these questions
And soon, they, too, will be stolen away.

Yes, I am still here.
Help me keep my dignity.
Help me remain a human being
In this shell of a woman I have become.
I beg that you not violate the person that
I still am.
In my world of silence.
I am still here.
Oh, I am still here.

Resources

The blog piece on 'senior moments' can be found at:

<https://seniorslifestylemag.com/health-well-being/7-tips-to-reduce-senior-moments/>

For a copy of the poem 'Emily Dickinson, 'I'm Somebody"' by Frances H. Kakugawa simply email Vic Gailiunas, NSCR Caregiver Support Program Coordinator
Vic.gailiunas@nscr.ca

Ms. Kakugawa is an internationally-acclaimed poet and has her own blog.

I hope you have enjoyed this post and remember always: self-care, self-care, self-care.



Frances H. Kakugawa
Author of "Emily Dickinson, I'm
Somebody"

CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP

North Shore Community Resources (NSCR) offers a monthly support group specifically for family caregivers who support their loved ones – either living together or apart.

The group's goal is to create community and offer a time of sharing, listening, and connecting for anyone with the unique experience of caregiving for family members.

Program participants are welcome to encourage and invite others they feel might benefit from joining the group.

Monthly Meetings

Next 2 meetings:

January 7 (Zoom)

February 4 (In person & Zoom)

Meetings are currently on the first Tuesday of each month from 6:30 – 8:30pm.

Currently we are meeting on Zoom and/or in person. For the Zoom link, please contact NSCR directly.

(photo credit – Paul McGrath)



Contact

For more information, details, or to find out more about NSCR's caregiver support programs, please contact:

Vic Gailiunas (Caregiver Support Program Coordinator) ~ Vic.Gailiunas@nscr.ca

Or Phone: 604-982-3320



CAREGIVER BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUP

North Shore Community Resources (NSCR) offers a support group specifically for people experiencing grief in the loss of a loved one. The group is designed to create community and offer a time of sharing stories and resources, listening, and connecting with others with similar experiences.

Tuesday, January 14, 2025 Group Meeting In Person at our NSCR Community Room and on Zoom, 6:00pm-8:00pm

Tuesday, February 11, 2025 Coffee Social (no agenda) at our NSCR Community Room, 11:00am-12:30pm



As we move into the New Year, things can seem more pronounced for those experiencing loss. It is a good time to consider our well-being, how to find meaning in grief, but also in hope, rejuvenation and renewal of spirit.

For more information, to register, and for details, please contact:

Vic Gailiunas
Caregiver Support Program Coordinator
604.982.3320
vic.gailiunas@nscr.ca



MEN'S CAREGIVER SUPPORT GROUP

North Shore Community Resources (NSCR) offers a support group specifically for male caregivers who support their spouses/partners, either living together or apart. The group was designed to create community and offer a time of sharing, listening, and connecting for men with the unique experience of caregiving for their partners.

Program participants are welcome to encourage other men they feel might benefit from joining the group to join us.

Monthly Meetings

We currently meet in-person at the NSCR Community Room on the first Thursday of each month, from 10:30am-12:30pm.

Next 2 meetings:

January 2

February 6



(photo credit – Paul McGrath)

Contact:

For more information and details, contact:

Vic Gailiunas (Caregiver Support Program Coordinator) ~ Vic.Gailiunas@nscr.ca

Pat Dean (Group Leader) ~ pdean@telus.net



KOREAN WELLNESS AND EDUCATION GROUP

North Shore Community Resources (NSCR) offers a wellness and education group specifically for the Korean community on the North Shore.

The group was designed to create community and offer a time of sharing, learning, and connecting for our Korean community.

Program participants are welcome to join us for a 2-hour session, held entirely in Korean, with guest speakers, resources, group interaction, and creative arts.

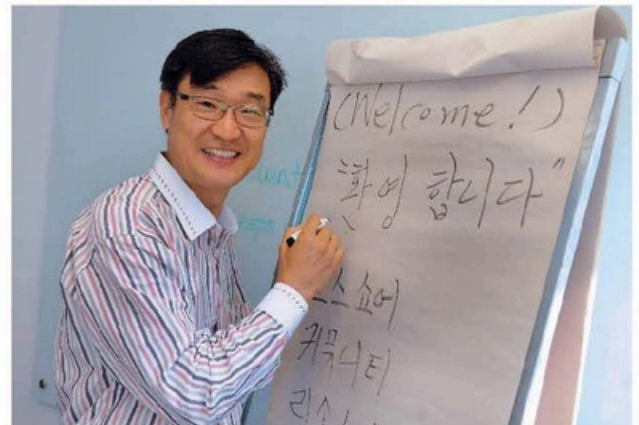
Monthly Meetings

We meet in person in our NSCR Community Room. Our meetings run on the second Wednesday of each month, from 2:00-4:00pm.

Next 2 Meetings:

January 8

February 12



(photo credit – Paul McGrath)

Contact

For more information and details, contact:

Yoonwon Lee (Group Leader) ~ infocwtc@gmail.com

Vic Gailiunas (NSCR Caregiver Support Program Coordinator) ~
Vic.Gailiunas@nscr.ca



PERSIAN WELLNESS AND EDUCATION GROUP

North Shore Community Resources (NSCR) offers a wellness and education group specifically for the Persian community on the North Shore.

The group was designed to create community and offer a time of sharing, learning, and connecting for our Persian community.

Program participants are welcome to join us for a session, held entirely in Farsi, with guest speakers, resources, group interaction, and music.

Monthly Meetings

We are currently meeting in person at our Community Room or on Zoom. Our meetings run on the third Monday of each month from 6:00-8:00pm.

Next 2 Meetings:

January 20 - Zoom

February 17 - In Person

Contact

For more information and details, contact:

Ayda Fathi (Group Leader) ~ aida.fathi97@yahoo.com

Mobina Fathi (Group Leader) ~ mobina.fathi98@yahoo.com

Neeki Alavi (Group Leader) ~ alavi.neeki@gmail.com

Vic Gailiunas (NSCR Caregiver Support Program Coordinator) ~ Vic.Gailiunas@nscr.ca



THE GRAPEVINE

North Shore Caregivers Newsletter



North Shore
Community
Resources

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