

Lessons from death: There is no real 'normal'

It turns out "normal" is a relative term. It's taken me a while to come to grips with this concept, especially since my husband Jim died from pancreatic cancer in December 2010, but I think I've finally accepted it.

Whenever something happens to us — no matter how deeply we are affected — we strive to get back to "normal." We think it is our happy place — a place of peace and contentment.

But normal is far from peaceful. Normal is fluid. It flows from the rhythm of your life in the moment you are in, then to the next moment and the next. It reshapes and reshapes again as the importance of events, people and situations changes.

We see normal as a haven where if we could just get back there, everything will fall into place. Everything will be "alright."

I constantly am saying to myself, "I can't wait until things get back to normal." But what I really want is to get back to my familiar routines.

Routine is a familiar order of events or processes in our lives. What I'm really seeking is some predictability. Not total pre-

dictability, though. That would be boring. But basic predictability, as opposed to what I perceive as constant upheaval.

As the owner of four Brittany dogs, I've learned the importance of routine because of how it affects the dogs when our usual pattern is interrupted for whatever reason.

The dogs' behavior becomes more erratic, and they are more needy of my time and attention when their routines are disrupted. They are more intense. Kind of off-kilter.

If the dogs are in their crates more than normal because we have company or we are on the road for a dog event, there is this burst of kinetic energy when they are let out or we get home that just flows and flows until they are settled back into their familiar routines.

Then they crash and sleep — their indication of peace and contentment.

I think it is sort of the same when a person has suffered great loss. Noth-

ing is familiar. All routines are disrupted. Normal has taken a major shifting in one direction or another, as normal has a tendency to do when it responds to life events. And we so much want our familiar routines.

But life will never be the same after the death of a loved one.

Not only has normal shifted, which we know is fluid anyway, but also our routines have shifted. And that throws us off balance. Off-kilter. Like the dogs.

So how do we cope with that?

I suppose there are multiple ways, but I redefined my routines. Because the definitions in my new reality no longer fit with my old routines, I simply changed them. It took time, but I did it.

There are some things that remain the same, of course. The trash has to go out to the roadside on Wednesdays. Bills are paid on a schedule. The dogs eat every 12 hours. I work at a full-time career on a schedule, more or less. Certain things need to get done at certain times.

But those are not the routines that are interrupted.

I am talking about eating alone as opposed to

eating with your spouse. Planning vacations by yourself. Taking over all of the household and yard chores and errands because the person with whom you shared those tasks is gone. Relying on friends and other family for backup when something major happens. Experiencing the joys and burdens that come from having and loving family alone instead of sharing them.

I am talking about the routines that help define who we are as people and how we respond to situations. The shattering of identity, self-confidence and our perceptions of our core traits that occurs with our loved one's death. The redefinition of our responses to crisis and to commonplace alike.

The remaking of what it means to be "me."

It's been one thing to learn to accept Jim's death; it has been totally another to accept my own.

Then to be able to pick up some of the pieces of my old self to put together with my new self and claim it all as my new normal. And to accept that the reconstructed "me" has some new routines that make it possible for me to find peace, joy

and love of friends and family again.

When Jim died I knew things would never be the same. It felt like part of me had died, too. But the human spirit is very resilient and does not easily give up its struggle to live and to feel alive. And out of those deaths has risen a stronger person who has been able to redefine and make room for key routines that make life possible and even enjoyable.

Dealing with the ever-shifting "normal" has been much easier for me since I've learned to embrace some of my new routines, and I know Jim would approve of the changes. Because, ultimately, he just always wanted me to be happy.

As a longtime employee of the Bangor Daily News, Julie Harris has served many roles over the years, but she now has her dream job as community editor. She lives in Hermon with her four Brittany dogs: Sassy, Bullet, Thistle and Quincy, who keep her busy in various dog sports. She was widowed at age 51 when her husband, Jim, died of pancreatic cancer. Follow her blog at curves.bangor-dailynews.com.



JULIE HARRIS

Chicken pie supper at Bangor Grange

BANGOR — A chicken pie supper and Wildwood Band concert will be held Saturday, Sept. 17, at Bangor Grange Hall, 1192 Ohio St.

Supper will be at 5:30 p.m. for \$8, children under 10 for \$4. Show will be at 7 p.m. for \$8.

Call 973-3976 for more information.

Relay for Life team to hold fundraiser

BANGOR — A Relay for Life team is hosting a chili and chowder fund-raising dinner 5-7 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 8, at Bangor Grange Hall 372, 1192 Ohio St.

Cost is \$7. Proceeds will go to The American Cancer Society. For questions or donations, call Laura Stowe at 735-4418.

Bean supper slated at Holden church

HOLDEN — A homemade baked bean supper will be held at 5 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 10, at Holden Congregational Church, 9 Rider Bluff Road.

The menu will include baked beans, hot dogs, casseroles, coleslaw, salads, rolls, pies and beverages.

Cost will be \$8; \$4 for children under 12; free for preschool.

Red Cross and Sport Clips Haircuts offer free haircut coupon

BANGOR — The American Red Cross and Sport Clips Haircuts are teaming up to offer free haircut coupons to those who come out to donate blood or platelets during September.

"The Red Cross and Sport Clips have partnered for several years to help ensure blood is available for patients in need leading into fall," said Donna M. Morrissey, director of national partnerships for Red Cross Biomedical Services, in a press release. "We are excited to partner once again for this year's Saving Lives Never Looked So Good campaign and offer a coupon for a free haircut to volunteer blood and platelet donors in appreciation for their lifesaving gift."

Anyone who gives blood or platelets through Sept. 30 will receive a coupon for a free haircut via email several days after their donation. The coupon is valid through Nov. 6, 2016, at participating Sport Clips locations, and donors must have a valid email address on record to receive the coupon.

"The need for blood touches so many lives — not just those who need blood, but their family members and loved ones, too. This is one way Sport Clips can thank those who give the gift of life to support the lifesaving mission of the Red Cross. They donate blood and we give them a free haircut," said Amanda Palm, corporate communications manager of Sport Clips, in the

Red Cross press release.

Donors of all blood types are urged to give. To schedule an appointment to donate, use the free Blood Donor App, visit redcrossblood.org or call 1-800-RED CROSS (1-800-733-2767). Donation appointments and completion of a RapidPass online health history questionnaire are encouraged to help reduce wait times.

Upcoming blood donation opportunities include:

— 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 10, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton Church, 857 Main St., Fryeburg.

— 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 11, Augusta Civic Center, 76 Community Drive.

— 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 11, Holden Fire Department, 570 Main Road.

— 1-6 p.m. Tuesday, Sept. 13, Skowhegan Elks Lodge, 21 Silver St.

— 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday, Sept. 13 and 14, Collins Center for the Arts, 2 Flagstaff Road, Orono.

— Noon-5 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 15, Second Congregational Church, 51 Main St., Newcastle.

— 7 a.m.-noon Thursday, Sept. 15, Maine Department of Transportation, 24 Child St., Augusta.

— 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Friday, Sept. 16, Katahdin Region Higher Education, 1 Dirigo Drive, East Millinocket.

— 1-6 p.m. Friday, Sept. 16, VFW, 58 Preble Ave., Madison.

— 1-6 p.m. Friday, Sept. 16, Unity Community Market, 368 Thorndike Road.

Breakfast buffet slated in Bucksport

BUCKSPORT — An all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet will be held 6:30-9:30 a.m. Saturday, Sept. 10, at Bucksport United Methodist Church, 71 Franklin St.

The cost is \$8, \$4 for children, and \$25 for a family of at least four.

For information, call the church office at 469-3622 or Ed Petravicz at 469-9979.

Community yard at Stockton Springs

STOCKTON SPRINGS — A giant community yard sale will be held 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 10, at Stockton Springs Community Library, 6 Station St.

Besides the yard sale, there will be a barbecue, children's events, a bake sale, a tea room, coffee and homemade doughnuts.



Kohl's Cares ABOUT ME
Growing Healthy Communities

A PROGRAM TO SUPPORT THE HEALTH AND WELLNESS OF MAINE FAMILIES

Our goal is to increase access to healthy foods for Maine kids through community and school gardens.

Partnering with Kohl's Cares, Sebasticook Valley Health (SVH) encourages Maine families and youth to discover the benefits of healthy eating through local farming and gardening.

SVH is passionate about helping nurture new and innovative programs for local schools, area farms and community groups.

To learn more about the Kohl's Cares About ME program and how to get involved yourself, please visit www.KohlsCaresAboutME.org



Kohl's Cares provides Maine families with an easy way to give back to Maine communities and support Maine kids' health!

Visit the Kohl's Cares website to learn more about Kohl's community giving efforts across the country and to view and purchase the Kohl's Cares merchandise.

"One hundred percent of the net profit from Kohl's Cares merchandise sold in local Kohl's stores supports the Kohl's Cares About ME program"

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