

## Finding a world of support

Online group lets grieving moms find someone who has been there

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What do you do with your dead son's stocking on your first Christmas without him?

Such a raw, almost awkward question. But as a member of a moms only online support group, Joanne Ravida felt comfortable posting her question to an online discussion board.

"Nothing is off-limits there," said 42-year-old Dundas mother. "There's nothing you can ask that's going to shock people."

It had been only three months since her 17-year-old son Anthony died unexpectedly from a brain aneurysm when Ravida posted her question last November.

Within days she received several heartfelt suggestions from fellow moms all over the world who had also lost children. One suggestion -- to hang it in his room -- sounded perfect. So that's what she did.

That ability to immediately connect and seek advice any time from people facing the same challenges you are is one reason people like Ravida turn to the online support community and why the number of those groups continues to grow.

Ravida joined DailyStrength.org, a popular online support group that boasts 1.5 million monthly visits on its website and offers more than 500 support groups covering various health conditions from depression and bereavement to autism and infertility.

She logs on every day to connect with women she now calls friends. She also plans to attend a retreat with group members in Niagara Falls this July.

"The group gives me a place to vent, cry, laugh, share and, most importantly, grieve," explains Ravida. "They just get it and you do not need to explain."

Ravida said her family and friends were amazing. The local chapter of Bereaved Families of Ontario was supportive. And her grief counsellor helped her through her initial stages of grief.

But where she feels comfortable and connected is online at Daily Strength where she can converse with moms who've also lost a child.

"Unless you've gone through it, it is not something you can comprehend," she said.

Dundas social worker Gary Direnfeld says online support groups can be a blessing or a curse.

A blessing because they provide an outlet to immediately link with others, which allows you to feel you are not alone.

"You're in a community of persons who will get you. That in and of itself is a tremendous source of comfort. It normalizes your awful feelings," he said.

Also, he adds, if you're in a rural community that doesn't offer much support, the online support community can be a lifeline.

But, he adds, it can be a curse for those who invest themselves solely in online support because it can exclude family and friends and undermine those relationships.

"It undermines them because we do have to grieve together in a shared understanding of our loss to equip us to integrate that experience into our lives. If we opt out of that to only an online world, we can actually distance ourselves from the very loved ones with whom we have to move forward."

He notes the past decade has seen a growth in all kinds of online support groups, including bereavement, as people turn to the Internet for everyday information.

Daily Strength, for example, has seen its popularity skyrocket from 6,500 registered users in December 2006 to 380,000 today.

Barbara Smith, of Georgia, founded the online group formomsonly at Daily Strength a few months after she lost her 24-year-old son, Evan, in September 2006.

She would spend hours online searching for women who had suffered a similar loss.

"I felt if I could find one other mom, maybe she would understand. If there was one mom, there has to be two."

On a typical day, the 54-year-old spends four to six hours contributing to her online group. Any inappropriate comments are immediately directed to the site's abuse centre.

She and other veteran members are also on the lookout for moms they consider might be suicidal so they can immediately reach out with a supportive e-mail.

"I say a quiet prayer that the right words will come out."

It's an inadequate gesture that illustrates a potential risk of online support groups, said Jeff Kleinberg, a New York psychologist and president-elect of the American Group Psychotherapy Association.

"It's not enough to say 'We're thinking of you.' People can very easily get over their heads very quickly," he said. "What we're dealing with are some very difficult problems that cannot be addressed by people without training."

He points to suicide hotline volunteers who undergo many hours of training and supervision.

The scholarly journal Computers in Human Behaviour examines the use of computers from a psychological perspective.

Its March 2008 issue published a study, called Coping with Somatic Illnesses in Online Support Groups that explored whether the feared disadvantages of online support, such as inappropriate remarks, actually occur.

Researchers analyzed a random sample of 1,500 from support groups, mainly used by women, and found there were few potential disadvantages in the content of the exchanges. They concluded that online support groups are a "viable option for support."

It doesn't bother Ravida that her online support group is not led by a trained professional.

"That's not what you need. Professionals are great to get you to a certain point, but how is a professional going to tell you whether to put a stocking up or not? You need someone who has gone through it."

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