

## **Losing Someone with COPD**

*By Jo-Von Tucker*

*Life is a great sunrise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one.  
-Vladimir Nobokov*

Sadly, we recently lost two of our COPD support group members. They passed away on the same day.

Elizabeth seemed to be such a gentle lady, and was enthusiastic about joining our group and coming to meetings. Jack was irrepressible...so full of life, and with such a zest for living! Jack, I believe, never met a stranger. He could - and did - converse with anyone who showed the least interest in talking with him. He took up many of the causes that were offered specifically for supplemental oxygen users, and came away with many friends each time. He had a special delight in his eyes... mischievous, yes... harmful to others, never!

Losing Jack has made me think about the valiant fight he put forth as he battled COPD. But more than that, Jack's life was open and loving, and accepting, and totally nonjudgmental. We can all learn from that. And we can all strive to embrace the positive aspects of our lives now. Even with COPD, as Jack did.

Okay, I know it's no fun living with obstructive lung disease. But we still have our vision, allowing us to see the beautiful things – and people – around us. We still have our hearts, although they may be a little rusty from the strain of pumping against impaired lung function, and those organs allow us feelings of love and affection, or so the fable of the heart goes.

We still, at least, most of us, have our hearing, resulting in receipt and retention of pleasant sounds and wonderful music, of soft voices and the excited laughter of babies. We still have our brains, mostly intact, which let us remember the good times and the great people we've known, some of which came directly from our involvement with our breathing support group. We can listen when friends and family talk to us, and really hear the meaning behind the words.

We still have a lot to be thankful for...and with many more good things to come. Sometimes it takes the loss of a friend to make us realize that, in spite of COPD, we can have a really good life.

We can still laugh, and cry when appropriate, and we can speak and observe and react. Impaired lungs can't rob us of those important things. We may not be able to run anymore, but we can walk.

We can make each day a renewal. We can commit ourselves to the

happiness that is here for each of us. And we can reach out to help others, especially other folks who also suffer with COPD. Do whatever it takes to remind yourself of the many precious dimensions of living. But never, ever take for granted the life we can live.

Take a page from Jack's book... live your life with joy in your heart, and don't be afraid to share it with others. You'll find that it's much more contagious than germs!

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## **Losing Friends in Pulmonary Rehab**

*By Jane M. Martin*

Probably the hardest aspect of my job as a respiratory therapist in pulmonary rehab is losing a patient to death.

The participants in our program become friends, the members of class becoming more like a family sometimes, cohesive, close. So when a member of our group passes away we can't help but be affected, peers as well as our staff. So, what to do when you know you all have an incurable, progressive disease? Even if the person who died didn't pass away as a direct result of his or her pulmonary disease, their passing reminds us of our own mortality. Sometimes people in our program ask, "Am I next?"

Here are some things we do to help in processing the loss of a friend. You might call them customs, even rituals. We call them honoring our friends. We call them comforting.

We put a picture of the lost classmate along with the obituary in the sign-in area. This way, participants know at the beginning of class that they've lost a friend. They then have an hour together to share memories, or at the very least, not be alone.

A dear lady in one class brings in a long-stemmed cut flower and places it on the chair where that person sat.

We all, classmates and staff, sign a sympathy card to send to the family.

If possible, staff and classmates attended the wake or visitation, individually. It means so much to the family to meet people who knew their loved one. Even though some have never met the people from pulmonary rehab, they feel they know us because they've heard their loved one talk about us.

If we can't attend services or visitation, we sometimes make a short phone call to a family members.

Some people in our program have learned how to raise monarch butterflies. There's a tradition in my family, and now with those in my pulmonary rehab program, to name a Monarch when it is released, to give it the name of someone you lost within the past year. Seeing a brand new butterfly spread its wings and fly while calling it by the name of your lost loved one is a healing experience and an affirmation that life does go on.

When we lose a friend in pulmonary rehab, yes, our grief is great. But, as a class, a group, peers, friends, we share our grief, our joy, our tears. Together we find comfort in memories, even sharing humor. It doesn't make it any easier, but it does give us comfort.

Maybe the person we lost was quiet and reserved, the class clown, or the den mother. No matter what, we are thankful for the way in which they contributed to the class. We can honor them by being thankful that they were a part of our experience – our journey to better health. But perhaps the greatest honor we can bestow is to promise they will never be forgotten.



### ***Do Not Stand at My Grave and Weep***

*Do not stand at my grave and weep  
I am not there, I do not sleep  
I am a thousand winds that blow  
I am the diamond glint on snow  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain  
I am the gentle autumn rain  
When you wake in the morning hush  
I am the swift, uplifting rush  
Of quiet birds in circling flight  
I am the soft starlight at night  
Do not stand at my grave and weep  
I am not there, I do not sleep  
Do not stand at my grave and cry.  
I am not there,  
I did not die!*

—Anonymous