



Going online to find information and support after a drunk driving crash

Web of Support

By Amy Stewart, LMSW, MADD
National Assistant Director of
Victim Services/Advocacy

Just over a decade ago, surfing meant putting on a wetsuit, grabbing a fiberglass board and heading to the beach. Today, surfing is what we do on our computers in the comfort of our own homes. And many of us are surfing the Web for much-needed information, resources and help.

Making the Connection

Five months after Sue Surber's grandson, Steffen, was killed by a drunk driver, she was browsing the Internet when she came across MADD's Web site. She immediately headed to the message boards.

"Instantly, I felt connected," Sue recalls. "I realized that this didn't just happen to me; other people were deeply affected by the impact of a drunk driving crash."

Injured victim/survivor and veteran Web surfer Don Valone agrees. "One of the most important benefits of the message boards is that victims/survivors can read a post by someone who has experienced a similar experience. Right after a crash, people think they are alone, but when they visit the message boards, they realize they are not."

In 1990, Don and his family were involved in a serious drunk driving crash that injured Don, his wife, Kathy, and their two daughters, Samantha and Jamie.

Focusing on helping the girls recover from their injuries, Don didn't immediately notice changes in himself that signaled a "hidden" injury. "I had to keep pushing [the doctors], who kept telling me I was just stressed. But I knew something was really wrong," Don says of the two years it took to be diagnosed with traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Initially, Don and Kathy went to the library in search of medical information to understand TBI, but later they relied on the Web to educate themselves by gathering medical information, including symptoms, treatment options and medication options. And it was this information that led Don to push his doctors. Otherwise, he may not have received the diagnosis when he did.

"We worked closely with our doctors in sharing what we learned," Don says.

Chat rooms also provided Don with much-needed support.

"They helped me immensely because they allowed me to talk with others who are suffering from or caring for someone with TBI," he says. "I learned how to care for myself and my daughters."

Transitional Medicine

For people who are grieving, resources that empower are also resources that heal. That's exactly why Kristi A. Dyer, M.D., M.S.—a medical practitioner who is also board certified in Bereavement Trauma and Traumatic Stress—launched the Journey of Hearts Web site (www.journeyofhearts.org) in October 1997.

"Journey of Hearts was created to educate visitors and heighten public awareness of grief and loss, and to de-stigmatize societal views on depression," Dr. Dyer says. "Through education, we believe the site empowers people to understand grief and, if needed, seek care."

The site emerged after Dr. Dyer talked with other physicians. "We were seeing more people with anxiety, grief or depression," she says. "Once major medical problems were ruled out and a diagnosis of grief or depression was made, patients often were unable or unwilling to seek counseling due to time constraints, limitation of mental health resources in rural areas, the costs of counseling and, not insignificantly, the social stigma of being diagnosed with depression, grief or anxiety."

When the site launched, Dr. Dyer found that she needed a term to describe the process grieving people often endure following the death of a loved one or any other significant loss. And she wanted the term to reflect the unique flavor of the Web site, which offers not only support but also medical information. Although Dr. Dyer's term "transitional medicine" is specific to www.journeyofhearts.com, it is reflective of what the Internet has to offer in terms of grief and medical resources.



"A Web site is an obvious adjunctive resource to supplement patient education already started by a physician or to reach those who may be homebound for a variety of reasons: physical, situational, psychiatric, emotional or financial," Dr. Dyer explains. "Web education is the process of educating people using information and resources from the Internet. And medical Web education consists of three interconnected components: patients, physicians and reliable medical information from the Internet."

Advantages of Technology

Grief is unique and has no timetable. That's precisely why the Internet offers many advantages to those seeking help.

"Grief is a private emotion and one that is often repressed," Dr. Dyer says. "An advantage to Web education on grief and loss is that a grieving person can utilize the resources when they need to, in the privacy of their own homes. Also, a Web site can be used by those in rural areas, where other resources may not be available.

"Accessing the Internet for support and information is different than accessing other sources. Not only is it available 24/7 but it also can provide immediate resources and, in some cases, responses," Dr. Dyer says. "And many online resources allow the user to remain anonymous."

For many, it's remaining anonymous that makes the Web so appealing.

"Not everyone feels comfortable talking to others face to face," Don says. "In a

chat room, you can throw your emotions out there. People might not be able to share something with me in person, but they can tell me when we are online."

Sue never pursued traditional methods of grief counseling, such as individual or group therapy. "I do better when I'm not looking someone in the eye," she says. "When I'm on the message boards or in a chat room, my wounds are hidden. Seeing the strength in others gives me strength."

When people reach out on the Web, they have the unique opportunity to increase their social network.

"I never thought I could create a bond of trust with people in a chat room, but I have," Don says. "A lot of people don't have access to support, or quality support. When you are online, you meet a wide variety of people from all over the country, all over the world. You may even connect to someone who lives in your own backyard."

Safe Surfing

Reaching out for help, whether in the form of information or emotional support, can be a risk physically, emotionally or financially. There are unlicensed, unqualified online providers who offer counseling or miracle cures and who are ready to take advantage of vulnerable individuals looking for help. There are also people who post messages that are hurtful and can potentially victimize people who are in pain.

"You always need to be a little cautious when you are online," Don recommends,

though he quickly points out that many sites have moderators or people who review message boards regularly to ensure inappropriate messages are not posted.

For newly bereaved victims, message boards may be less helpful because posts often receive replies much later or not at all. Because of this, Sue recommends that newly bereaved victims access both facilitated chats and message boards for support. She says, "Chats can be a lot more rewarding than the message boards, because the feedback is instant."

Giving Back

Both Don and Sue say they continue to join chat rooms and post on message boards, but today they do so to give back.

"My family has been through a lot," Don says. "But I don't let it run my life, I let it drive me to help others. I don't want to see anyone have to go through what my family has gone through."

Sue says that she is constantly amazed by the resolve of her fellow surfers, as they are willing to relive what they have experienced to support others. "I know the despair the new people are going through," Sue says. "The support I give back makes me feel that Steffen didn't die in vain." ■

Surfing for Support

When browsing the Internet for information, resources and support, Kristi A. Dyer, M.D., M.S., recommends keeping these things in mind.

- Check the organization's privacy policy, which will tell you whether information is collected and/or shared.
- Look to see if resources on a site clearly identify the author or source. Users should be able to easily contact those who have created the site.
- Be aware that there are unlicensed, unqualified information providers and resources on the Internet that are working outside of ethical and legal boundaries.
- Do not use Web site information and advice in place of the care of a personal physician or counselor.