

Meeting Minutes  
April 14, 2020

Guest Speaker: Dr. Sonja Burke, Psy. D.

Meeting called to order at 7:00 PM via ZOOM

Justus began with a brief discussion of ZOOM courtesy and introduced the guest speaker, Dr. Sonja Burke, who has extensive and varied experiences in the field of psychology.

Dr. Burke emphasized that it's important to celebrate small victories, that showing up for this group (PPOA) helps not only ourselves but each other. She outlined her agenda for the meeting which included a discussion of practical skills, answering members' questions, applying the grief process to each of our unique ostomy situations and ending with some mindfulness and grounding skills we can use in our daily lives.

She reminded us that self-care and reducing isolation are always important, but especially now during the pandemic.

Dr. Burke described the grief process with regard to ostomates. We were all "ostomized" as a result of some kind of medical crisis, and there is a loss of sense of self. We mourn who we were before the ostomy.

The five stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

When experiencing grief, we experience hurt and pain, trying to wrap our heads around the fact that this is our new reality. We are missing aspects of our old life. It's often a shocking total life changer. Everyone has a unique story, and the topics that are discussed at PPOA can spark new topics, new friendships and new understandings.

Bargaining is the idea that you wonder what would have happened if you had done something differently.

David A. brought up an issue he has with anger about the medical profession not listening to patients. Looking back on his own career as a doctor, he would like to see the profession as a whole become more compassionate with their listening skills.

Dr. Burke went on to remind the group about their own personal process. "Don't discount any of your feelings," she said.

Anger is a typical and comfortable stage for men, as it's more culturally acceptable for them to feel anger. Dr. Burke reminded the group that anger is actually a secondary emotion. There is always some other emotion under the anger, an emotion that people are not comfortable

expressing. Usually it is sadness that lurks under anger, which leads to depression and results in anger. This in turn can be accompanied by hopelessness.

Everyone's story is different, and that shapes the grief process. It's not a linear progression.

Acceptance is another stage of the grief process, involving finding meaning. How do we gain meaning with our new reality. Many of us have forged new connections and experienced gratitude through the process of living with a stoma.

Anxiety and fear are real feelings we all face, and Dr. Burke broke these down by encouraging us to recognize the difference between real problems, which are things that are actually happening now, and hypothetical problems, which are things that may or may not happen. "Catastrophizing" can be exhausting and can make everything worse for us. One way to avoid these feelings is to pay it forward, get involved with helping others and thereby, helping ourselves in the process.

One question from a group member about a term she herself coined, "*awfulizer*," especially in the context of the coronavirus pandemic, led to a discussion about the decision tree. This is a practical means to help people break down whether a problem is actually happening or might happen, and if it's something that we can or should do anything about. Ask yourself if you can do anything about it now, yes or no? Ask yourself if it is actually happening, yes or no? The decision tree is a visual tool that can help people climb out of the despair that comes with anxiety and fear.

In closing, Dr. Burke left us this advice: This is not a journey we should be going on alone.

The meeting wrapped up around 8:00 PM.

A few resources that Dr. Burke mentioned that may be useful, though not specific to ostomates, are:

**Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha**  
by Tara Brach

**Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief**  
by David Kessler