When caring for patients with cancer, a number of situations arise that cause nurses to grieve. Nurses need time and space to grieve to prevent the untoward effects of cumulative grief. While providing a safe space for nurses to be vulnerable in grief, Songs for the Soul combines the healing effects of expressive writing, storytelling, and music to help nurses address the grief and suffering they experience in their work. The use of storytelling through music portrays an expression of their grief that matches the intensity of their caregiving experience.

Until a year ago, my entire nursing career had been in oncology—first as an inpatient and outpatient nurse, then as a nurse practitioner. To care with compassion required me to hold a space for each patient and maintain an emotional balance between fear and despair on one hand, and hopefulness on the other. I understood the gravity of that responsibility. I have learned endlessly and been inspired by so many of the individuals I have cared for. I have also experienced many losses.

Processing these losses is imperative to being able to continue to do this work. However, in my nursing education, I was not taught to address my own grief, nor was it discussed in my work environment. It was the rarest moment when I would have time to reflect on a loss or a very difficult circumstance before having to move onto the individualized needs of other patients. Over the years, I developed my own way of dealing with repeated grief, but I did not realize what I was doing until my grandmother was diagnosed with lung cancer. I grieved the loss of her upon her diagnosis. While the rest of my family held out hope for possibility, I mourned. I realized that I also was grieving the patients I cared for at their diagnosis. At first, I rationalized that this was a healthy way of coping. I believed I would not be hurt by a patient’s dying process; I could remain simply a vessel for caregiving. Now, I realize that I had lost hope that they would survive. Rather than insulate myself from loss, I was stuck in a state of perpetual grief. An essential step to my grieving process was missing, and, after 14 years of doing meaningful work that I loved, I had to step away from direct patient care. I continued to feel a great deal of compassion for patients, but my work began to cause pain—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Program Development

I do not know if “compassion fatigue” fully describes my experience, but as I read the literature and shared my findings with colleagues, I learned I was not alone. In an effort to address the changing relationship I was having with a career to help others, I developed a program called Songs for the Soul (S4S) (www.song-soul.org). I wanted to create a program to help nurses address the grief and suffering they experience in their jobs. S4S combines the healing effects of expressive writing, storytelling, and music to facilitate a deeper exploration of the nursing experience.

I piloted the S4S program in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with a group of seven oncology, palliative care, and holistic nurses. For six weeks, the group met weekly to participate in an expressive writing workshop. The goal of the workshop was twofold—first, to show them that they can write. Many nurses do not think of themselves as writers. Because of this, they do not use writing as a means to process their work. The second goal was for them to write a story that would be turned into a song by a songwriter. My working hypothesis was that telling their story through music would deepen the nurses’ healing process.

Healing Through Storytelling

The nurses wrote beautiful stories about their nursing experiences, involving love, friendship, loss, and gratitude. They wrote...