

# Making it through the dark



DEBBIE EGAN-CHIN

Jane Smith Fisher of Long Beach said she has stayed positive by following two basic precepts: "I'm still here" and "My glass is always half full." ■ Video: [newsday.com/Act2](https://www.newsday.com/Act2)

## A Long Beach woman shares her methods for getting over the hard times in life

BY ARLENE GROSS  
Special to Newsday

**M**om, survivor, optimist. These are the three words Jane Smith Fisher uses to describe herself. "When something terrible happens, we don't go away: We're still here. We're still us," she said. If you've just become a widow, you're going to be sad, she explained. "But you're still

here and there is still a life for you. I don't know how long it's going to take for you to have that life, but there is still a life." Despite an abiding optimism, Fisher, 62, of Long Beach, has experienced dark times and unrelenting heartbreak. Metaphorically, she said, stretches of her life were "like being in the ocean and the waves keep coming." In the summer of 1990, Fisher's life seemed to fall apart. In August, her apparently

healthy father died unexpectedly after a heart attack on the golf course. Fisher, who describes herself as very close to her parents, even dependent on them, was devastated. "I was in an unhappy, very short-lived marriage. I ended up leaving my husband, scooping up my baby, and moving in with my mother and grandmother to help take care of them." Thirteen months later, her mother, in remission from ovarian cancer, died. Fisher

was left to care for her 89-year-old grandmother while raising her son, Andrew, then 2, in her childhood home in Freeport. "I was determined to make a good life for the two of them," Fisher recalled. Then, in December 1992, Andrew's father, 52, died of a heart attack, and Fisher's grandmother died two weeks later. "In two years, we lost almost everyone we loved," Fisher said. Her only other family were a brother and sister who

didn't live on Long Island. "I looked down at my 3-year-old and created the mantra, 'We deserve to be happy, too,'" said Fisher, then a 32-year-old full-time mom. **BUMPY ROAD TO HAPPINESS** After the deaths in her family, Fisher noticed many people didn't know what to say to her; some avoided her altogether. Living by the "Nobody

See **SURVIVOR** on E22



# Life with a **positive** stance

## SURVIVOR from E21

wants to see you cry” dictum instilled by her mother, Fisher added one of her own: “Misfortune has a shelf life.”

Wanting to stay positive for her son, Fisher filled their days with trips to the beach, movies, museums, amusement parks, playgrounds and other fun activities. “We were always on the go. I did not want my son to be a victim. That was really important to me,” she said.

That winter, Fisher came up with the first of many strategies: ice skating lessons for Andrew that kept him engaged for a half-hour each week and gave her a much-needed break — to ice skate on the other side of the rink.

“I realized that it was just time for me — and I loved it,” she said. “And, then I loved going home with Andrew after.”

Fisher had experienced depression throughout her life and, in 1997, was finally diagnosed with the mood disorder and put on medication. “I knew there was something wrong with me when I was in high school,” she said. “I didn’t know what it was: In the ‘70s nobody talked about depression.”

At the same time, Fisher is quick to distinguish between depression and sadness.

“Yes, you can be sad when you’re depressed. However, it [depression] is truly a different mental space,” she said. (And people who think they are biologically depressed, she said, should seek help from a health care professional.)

At the time of her diagnosis, Fisher was working as a teaching assistant. In 2000, she began studying for a master of education degree at Adelphi University that she completed three years later, at age 40.

When her son went away to college in 2008, Fisher, who’d been teaching pre-K at a Nassau public school for 2½ years, had a terrible bout of depression, was hospitalized for 18 days and out of work for six weeks — and lost her job. “It scarred me for a long time,” she said.

Over time, Fisher said, she has found the right medication to manage her depression. “I’ve not missed a single day



Jane Smith Fisher, above, holds a 1990 photo of herself with her husband, Philip, and their son, Andrew. At left, Fisher, center, poses for a photo in 1985 with her parents, sister, brother and grandmother. After the unexpected deaths of her parents, grandmother and ex-husband, Fisher became intentional about pursuing happiness.

said, “I felt so badly for her given how much she has had to handle on her own.”

### SPREADING THE WORD

Fisher, who for years didn’t speak about her depression except to family and friends, eventually decided to share her story with others. “If people don’t start talking about mental illness, the stigma will never go away,” she explained.

To that end, two years ago she launched happywhensad.com to share the coping strategies she learned over a lifetime of overcoming depression and facing adversity. (She also gives “How to Be Happy When Sad” presen-

tations at libraries around Long Island for which she receives a fee, but are free to attendees.)

Though there are plenty of websites and books offering advice on how to find happiness, Fisher described hers as unique in its message that people can find moments of happiness while struggling through challenging times.

“If your husband has stage 4 cancer, you probably don’t have a happy life, but you can have moments,” she said. “I had to figure this out myself and that’s why I wanted to share this.”

In spite of life’s hardships, Fisher has resolved to stay

since then because of depression. And that was 13 years ago.”

Struggling to find a good paying job for years, Fisher said she finally landed her dream job in January 2020 as an employee manager for the

Hempstead School District.

And, at times, when she’s really needed to cry, she turns to her twin sister, Carole.

Noting how proud she is of her sister for never giving up, Carole Smith, a media consultant who lives in New Jersey,



## Coping strategies

Clinical psychologist Marc Shulman, founder-director of Long Island Psychology in Garden City and Rockville Centre, shares these tips for dealing with tragedy and hardship.

■ **Ask for help:** Whether it's from mental health professionals, support groups, friends or family.

■ **Lean into thoughts and feelings:** Allow yourself to experience pain and difficult emotions. Talking about your experience can help relieve stress; find others with comparable experiences.

■ **Take care of yourself:** Exercise, eat well, get enough sleep and be kind to yourself. Express your feelings through journaling, meditation, art, dance, etc., to help process experiences and get to a more healthy emotional space.

■ **Cultivate mental toughness:** Separate current painful emotions from overall emotional well-being. There is no timeline for healing but know that you possess the resilience and strength to heal.

■ **Home in on character strengths:** Identify your strengths to help you with acceptance, recovery and healing. Build on your strengths to develop a growth-oriented mindset.

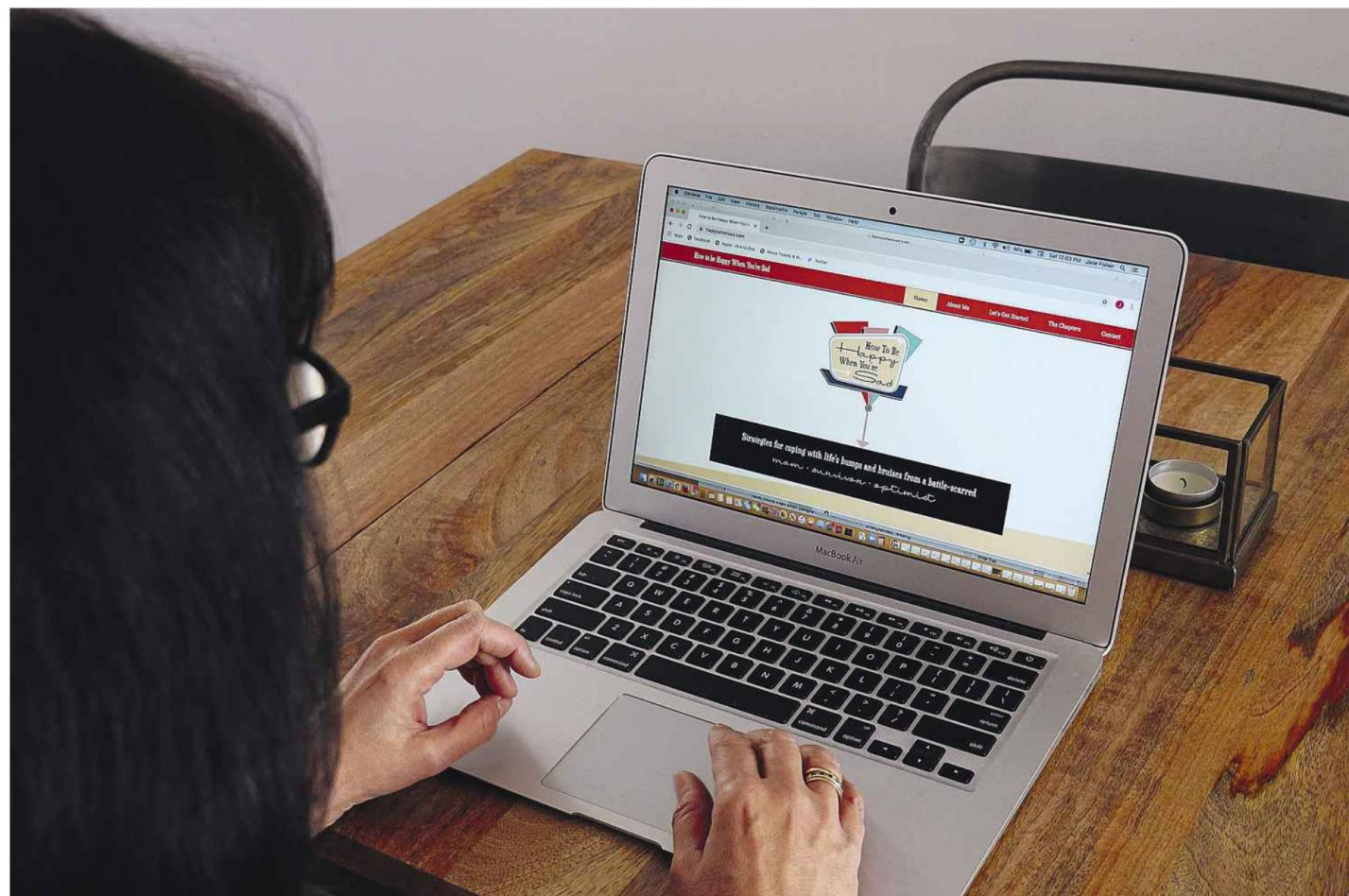
■ **Frame an optimistic outlook:** Understand that you alone determine how you approach and internalize challenges. Be mindful and active in taking small steps forward. — **ARLENE GROSS**

positive by following two basic precepts: "I'm still here," and "My glass is always half full."

The irony — not lost on her — is that so many things haven't worked out well for her, like assuming she'd win a race for Nassau County legislator in 2017. (She didn't.) The same year, her second marriage ended in divorce.

"There's no sense in thinking the other way," she said about optimism. "No one can give me a rationale for being pessimistic."

The key for Fisher, who credits her mother for her resilience, is finding moments to escape whatever is bringing



Jane Smith Fisher started her website, [happywhensad.com](http://happywhensad.com), to share her strategies for coping with the sadness that life inevitably brings.

“By having moments of peace and solace and happiness, you can think about moving forward.”

— Jane Smith Fisher

her down. As she advises on her website, avoid the “what ifs” in life and distract yourself with a change of scenery.

“By having moments of peace and solace and happiness, you can think about moving forward. Maybe you actually can move forward,” she said.

Staff at the Plainview-Old Bethpage Public Library were a bit hesitant to book Fisher's program in July 2019, noted library director Gretchen Browne. “You never know with any program, except when you are featuring live Saturday evening entertainment such as a musical or theatrical event, how it's going to go over. We weren't sure if people would come. And they did,” Browne said of the few dozen patrons who attended.

After Fisher's formal presentation and Q&A, attendees will typically ask her more questions and share their own stories of loss and loneliness. “I

think the reason that people relate to me and enjoy spending that time with me is because, as I like to say, 'I'm not sitting in an ivory tower: I'm you.'”

At times, participants have asked to stay in touch, but Fisher always declines. “I look at it as I'm not a therapist, and I'm proud of the fact that I'm helping them in some small regard, but if people kept in touch with me, I think they would look at me in a different way, and that's not fair to them,” Fisher said.

Therapy, in fact, has proved an effective tool in her own life; she now speaks with her therapist every two to three weeks, managing for herself on the off-weeks. “I don't need it the way I once did, but it's a luxury,” she admitted.

Suzanne Schultz, a personal trainer and substitute teacher, has been friends with Fisher since their kids were in nursery school. “Jane is extremely bold when it comes to speak-

ing out about her depression and sadness in her life, ultimately to share her strategies with others with the hope that her words and experiences can help those in need,” said Schultz, 64, of Oceanside.

Writing about one's suffering can be therapeutic, but that hasn't been the case for Fisher — in spite of creating her own website. “It's very hard for me to do this,” she said. “I actually sit and cry, because it's forcing me to think about the very sad things that have happened to me. But I'm doing it as a public service.”

### LIVING 'HAPPY WHEN SAD'

Before COVID-19, Fisher often went for walks and bike rides. Then, early in the pandemic, she took up online aerobics and strength-training classes.

“It completely changed my life,” she said, adding that she walks more frequently on the boardwalk near her home and

recently began meditating. “I always have new strategies. It's an evolving thing.”

Though she contends that this is probably the best time of her life — she and her son both have good jobs (Andrew, 31, lives upstate and works in the film industry) — Fisher doesn't expect to be happy all the time.

“I'm lonely sometimes,” she said. “I do everything I can to try and fight the loneliness, but I never have gotten used to living alone. And I've been living alone for four years now.”

And here she shares another coping strategy. Often when she's feeling down while driving, Fisher cranks up the radio and starts dancing — keeping both hands on the wheel — which always lifts her spirits.

“I'd love to someday be driving down the street and looking to my left and right and see lots of people dancing in their cars,” she said.