

# In times of grief and mourning, Midwest wellness retreats offer guided healing

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There's an inherently healing quality to travel, particularly when it involves communing with nature and escapes from daily routine.

And when a traveler seeks to address a specific wound — loss, grief, trauma — that healing aspect becomes even more vital.

Over nearly three years, the COVID-19 pandemic has upended mental wellness on a global scale, leaving millions in mourning and a battered collective psyche. Being robbed of opportunities to process the scope of tragedy has left Americans grappling with [a second pandemic of grief](#) that is likely to continue for years.

As a new year begins with fewer health and travel restrictions — and, at present, low infection rates — travelers looking to at last address grief or woes buried in the avalanche of three years of anxiety and sorrow can turn to several sources for retreats devoted to healing and expert-guided processing.

"America is a brutal place to grieve for most ... and that grief continues to be stigmatized. But we're not designed to grieve in isolation," says Dr. Anna Roth, a psychologist who offers guided grief retreats. "Culturally, we have short-term responses to what is really a marathon experience."

In Bayfield, Wisconsin, a serene silence, save for the soft crunch of snow underfoot as you make your way through the woodland trails, is reason enough to make the trip to Wild Rice Retreat ([wildriceretreat.com](http://wildriceretreat.com)) on the banks of Lake Superior.

Wild Rice Retreat in Bayfield, Wisconsin, offers wellness experiences rooted in yoga, nature and guided healing. Dr. Anna Roth also offers retreats at the resort focused on grief and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. (Wild Rice Retreat / HANDOUT)

The 114-acre resort devotes itself to restorative escapes grounded in yoga, classes such as [forest bathing](#) and tai chi, and guided retreats led by writers, photographers, grief counselors and more.

"It is really designed for adults who are looking for rest, who are looking to tap into creativity and looking to have some lifelong learning opportunities," says Heidi Zimmer, who runs Wild Rice after a career creating community art spaces through the nonprofit Artspace.

Bayfield is a two-hour drive from Duluth International Airport in Minnesota, but if you're coming from the Midwest, Zimmer

suggests guests build in time to drive to Wild Rice Retreat. The journey becomes a way to prepare for the experience, and Zimmer says focusing on the changing landscape and celebrating the decision to take time for themselves is a good way to start the journey.

Guests typically arrive in the late afternoon and grab a quick drink at the wine bar before heading to their lodgings. The Scandinavian-inspired spaces range from a tiny-home-esque cabin known as a RicePod, to a communal TreeHaus that sleeps up to eight people. Furry friends are welcome, and giant picture windows create a seamless blend between the dwellings and the surrounding environment.

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The days that follow are punctuated with candlelight stretches, storytelling sessions, and healthy-yet-indulgent meals such as zoodles with puttanesca sauce and bison meatballs, finished off with dark chocolate brownies and peanut butter ice cream. You may gather your courage and do a cold plunge before warming up in the sauna, or relish the sensation of fat water droplets crashing onto your skin in the Rain Room.

“We want to help you feel nourished and rested and

celebrated," Zimmer said. "The programming is there to support your rest and rejuvenation and well-being. We are a retreat center, which comes with the peace and Zen you don't get at traditional family resorts."

And that's precisely what Roth was looking for.

Roth, a Minnesota-based doctor of counseling psychology and registered yoga instructor, began offering guided retreats at Wild Rice in 2022 as a way for participants to process grief birthed in the pandemic and find a way forward. The four-day retreat, which is set to take place again in June and costs \$2,196 to \$2,896, is designed for women to immerse themselves in an intensive therapeutic program tailored to the challenges of the past three years.

The long weekend is infused with both laughter and tears, grounded in experiences such as a "threshold moment," when participants gather around a fire and decide what they need to let go of before crossing the threshold toward healing.

"We need these experiences of remembering who we are and how life can be, then re-entering life and making necessary changes to evolve and hold grief within us in a new way," Roth says.

Even those not in mourning could be struggling with mental wellness; [one 2022 study published in the British Medical Journal](#) found people who had COVID-19 were 39% more likely to be diagnosed with depression and 35% more likely to be diagnosed with anxiety in the months following their illness than people without COVID-19. Stress and sleep disorders were also more likely in COVID-19 patients.

Roth hopes to expand her trauma-informed program to seasonal retreats and an online program for those who can't make the trip to Wild Rice. And even if her retreat isn't the right fit, she encourages anyone suffering a loss — whether it be a loved one, their own health or the pre-pandemic way of life — to find time to heal.

“Engage with it directly and create some specific time to honor your loss as often and as long as you need to,” she said. “Maybe it's interwoven into daily life ... or finding a group with your exact experience of loss, although that's not necessary. The point is engaging in it rather than avoiding.”

Grief and wellness retreats are not a pandemic-specific creation; many are offered in temperate Edens such as Hawaii, New Zealand or the Caribbean, and many cost thousands of dollars to attend. But there are also accessible options available within driving distance of Chicago.

Not far from Wild Rice Retreat, the nonprofit Faith's Lodge

[faithslodge.org](https://faithslodge.org)) is named after the owners' stillborn daughter and was founded to help families struggling with the loss of a child. First-time guest rates are \$149 per night per room, but full and partial financial assistance is also available. Its lodge can also be rented out for larger groups, with options available for on-site services that can be added to the reservation.

The lodge's grief retreats are designed for specific needs and experiences, such as losses of children due to violence, illness, suicide or overdose. Some are for parents only, while others are open to families, and others are specifically tailored to experiences of parents of color.

Camp Erin, based in Chicago's Noble Square neighborhood in West Town, is part of the national Eluna network ([elunanetwork.org](https://elunanetwork.org)) of sleepaway camps for children 6-17 years old who are grieving a significant person in their lives. The free camp offers grief education and emotional support, and its next dates are July 7-9.

Five hours northwest of Chicago, the Christine Center ([christinecenter.org](https://christinecenter.org)) was founded by Illinois' Wheaton Franciscan Sisters in 1980 on a 240-acre farm. The center offers a variety of spiritual and nature-focused retreats with modern and rustic cabins, a guesthouse and tent camping sites ranging from nightly rates of \$20-\$140 per person. Meals, pet fees and spiritual guidance rooted in the center's

Franciscan practices are additional, but sliding scales and scholarships are available.

And while summer might seem like the ideal time for a Midwest retreat, there is something to visiting places like Wild Rice in the winter months, as well, says Zimmer, who describes it as a “particularly magical and peaceful up here.”

And she’s right. There’s something indescribably beautiful about the fresh white snow glittering untouched on the ground or precariously piled on even the thinnest points of branches. The world feels a little more gentle, a little more soft, and each breath of crisp winter air brings a soothing sense of lightness and calm.

It’s this feeling that makes guests return again and again.

“I can’t wait to come back,” said one woman in the sauna before she sighed, closed her eyes and leaned back against the cedar planks radiating warmth.

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