

# A Survival Guide for Life after Loss

by Elaine Mansfield

*Elaine's husband, Vic, died in June 2008. She is slowly learning to live without him. She wrote this in January 2009 to describe some approaches that have helped her cope with her grief. She has shared these in the hope that you, too, may find them useful.*

## Part I: The Body

1. **Make pots of soup.** Share it with others and freeze some for the hard days. Find nourishing comforting recipes. Feed yourself well and purposefully so that you can avoid living on chocolate and granola or nothing at all.
2. **Go outside every day—even if it's 10 degrees.** Breathe fresh air and move. Look at the sky. Follow animal tracks in the snow. When it's cold, move faster. Buy wool socks, warm boots, and snow pants.
3. **Exercise.** Walk. Lift weights. Do yoga or Pilates. It helps to feel strong, plus exercise prevents depression. It takes strength to endure this sadness.
4. **Get a massage from someone who is loving and gentle with your pain.** Find a massage therapist who creates a space of beauty and serenity. Find someone warm and soothing and allow yourself to weep as you are touched.
5. **If you live alone, invite animals into your life.** Spend time with your dog who is saddened by your tears and always ready for a walk. Get a cat or two. Feed birds. Feed something besides yourself.
6. **Reach out to others in need.** Make food, offer rides, volunteer, donate time or money, send a postcard, or call someone who is lonely.
7. **Listen to music that brings you joy or moves you to tears.** Move with your grief. Ask friends to dance or sway with you. Dance alone, when you're ready, even if it makes you cry. Your body needs to cry.
8. **Sort. Give away. Throw out. Label. Recycle. Sort some more.** Since your grief may feel immovable, move what can be moved. Move furniture and books. Glue what is broken. Give away what no longer serves you. Create beauty around you.
9. **Grow vegetables and flowers.** Grow houseplants to remember the color green in winter. Buy flowers when the world feels bleak. From the beginning of time, the earth has absorbed the painful emotion we humans must endure. From the beginning of time, the earth has patiently taught us about natural cycles of birth and death.
10. **Lament.** Make noise if possible. Wail if you dare. Relieve your body of the burden of carrying repressed grief.

## Part II—Soul

- 1. Share your grief with friends and family.** Your honesty will be a relief to most people. You may feel exposed and vulnerable, but you will not feel isolated.
- 2. Notice who welcomes your tears and sadness.** Reach out to those who offer support. Accept that your grief is too much for some old friends. Maybe they'll be there when you're happy again, and maybe not, but new friends will arrive if you reach out.
- 3. Go to a therapist or bereavement group.** Talk to someone who knows how to listen for the wisdom and intuition beneath your sadness. This is especially important if you have lost the person with whom you shared life's details.
- 4. Follow the trail of your dreams.** If therapy isn't possible, speak your dreams to a close friend. Write them down. Draw them. Make collages. Sculpt them in clay. Dream images will help you digest your old life and find a new one.
- 5. Visit family and friends.** It's good to get away for an afternoon, a day, or a week and good to return home to your grief work.
- 6. Write each day.** Keep a record of your experience. You will look back and see that things are changing over the months, even if you feel stuck today.
- 7. Paint your emotions, your dreams, and your memories—even if you have never painted before.** Try the vibrant colors of oil pastels or try watercolors. Painting and drawing calm the emotions, if you give up your judgment about the artistic merit. Notice that it is rare to weep while painting. Watercolors help keep the wetness on the paper rather than in your eyes.
- 8. Read books related to your particular loss.** Make a list of the most helpful to share with others when they need them. Check the hospice library and the public library. Browse at Amazon or a local bookstore.
- 9. Read poetry that speaks to your grief.** Try Mary Oliver's *Thirst* or Stephen Levine's *Breaking the Drought*. Read poems by Rainer Maria Rilke, Rumi, and Emily Dickinson.
- 10. Grieve with your children.** Speak freely about the memories, loves, and losses you share. Speak of your experience with them so they can speak of theirs. Cook their favorite dishes. If they live far away, send them home with a cooler full of frozen soup.

## Part III. Spirit

1. **Meditate or pray—in your own way.** Spend some time each day in silence. This is a comforting way to begin the day. Light candles in honor of your loss. Light candles in honor of your future. Breathe and be with what is, even if it hurts.
2. **Make altars.** Put water in a favorite pottery bowl. Light more candles. Include your paintings and favorite photos. Include feathers and rocks, poetry and inspiring quotes. Include notes of intention and notes of love and encouragement to yourself. Include messages to the one you have lost.
3. **Create rituals to honor death and life and mark your passage.** Remember birthdays, death days, and any significant day. Small rituals help us move through.
4. **Build an outdoor cairn alone or with others.** Take flowers there, take favorite stones and pine cones, circumambulate, and watch the seasons change. Take all your grief there and imagine leaving one drop behind.
5. **Admire the clear night sky.** Notice the phases of the moon. Watch the evening Venus and the morning Venus. Learn the constellations. The size of the universe helps keep grief in context.
6. **Watch the sunset or sunrise whenever possible.** You will experience first-hand that life goes on and the earth has not failed you.
7. **Take solace from books** that put your loss in perspective and widen the view, such as Pema Chodrun's *When Things Fall Apart* or Ety Hillesum's *An Interrupted Life*. You will be reminded that loss is a universal human experience and can be our teacher.
8. **Remember all that is still good in your life.** Notice beauty wherever you find it. Notice the gift of human kindness and friendship. Along with lamenting your loss, consciously and purposefully praise what remains.
9. **Be patient with yourself.** Be patient with the grieving process.
10. **Play that old Beatles song:** “Let it Be. Let it Be. Let it Be. Let it Be. There will be an answer. Let it Be.”

*Elaine Mansfield is a nutrition and exercise counselor and a volunteer with Hospicare & Palliative Care Services of Tompkins County*