

TENDING THE BODY THROUGH THE HARD TIMES

By Elaine Mansfield

My husband's illness and death wreaked havoc on my self-care plan. I'm an exercise trainer and a nutritionist, so I know how to stay in good health, but while Vic was sick, it was hard to stick with the program. After his death, my mind took a nihilistic turn, making it impossible to remember why my health mattered. Like others accompanying someone they love to the threshold of death, I got through each day any way I could. Who cared about ten extra pounds and tight clothes? Why not eat a late night bagel or a bowl of granola if it brought a moment of pleasure?



Elaine Mansfield and Willow

Even at the hardest moments, I remembered that a brisk walk outdoors would soften my anxiety and make the waves of grief easier to withstand. Observing nature's rhythms reminded me that I am part of a greater, ever-transforming ecosystem. Death is as ordinary as life, a natural ending, as well as the beginning of something new. From this perspective, I told myself what I have told many clients: "The challenges of life feel insurmountable when we abandon our bodies. Movement makes the body sing and hushes the agitated mind. Take a little time to care for yourself."

Some days, I almost appreciate the angst that forces me to my feet and out the door. I am grateful for the beauty of budding cherry trees, green paths through the woods, and up-hill climbs that force breath into my diaphragm and open my tight chest and belly. Spontaneous joy arises when I find coyote scat or raccoon tracks along the stream. I love knowing who lives in my neighborhood.

Strength training demands more will and structure. I took a few months off when my husband was most ill, but returned to my exercise room two weeks after his death. I didn't feel ready to lift weights. It required too much effort and what difference did it make anyway? Inspired by Vic's efforts to maintain strength despite illness, I repeatedly told myself, "It doesn't help to abandon my body. It doesn't help to feel sluggish and weak. Feeling healthy is what helps." When I finished that first gentle, brief session, I felt hope. As in the past, strength training delivered a more heroic attitude, like a

baseball player smacking a ball out of the park or a woman pushing her child through the birth canal.

Food remains more challenging than exercise. It's fraught with childhood memories of comfort and solace. After all, Grandma's cherry pies and buttermilk biscuits eased me through my dad's illness and death when I was fourteen. I've struggled with overeating since then, but had that habit under control for years. Unfortunately, old wild appetites returned to devour me.

Many grievors have trouble swallowing the smallest bites, but some of us resort to overeating to quiet anxiety and bring on sleep. I didn't care much about food for a month or so after Vic's death, but soon the gnawing emptiness in my belly made me long for sweet satiety wherever I could find it. Fortunately, my good habits didn't abandon me completely. I ate oats for breakfast, vegetable soups for lunch, and salad for dinner as I had for many years, but the extras got me in trouble, making me feel like I'd once again given up on myself and my life.

It's been nearly two years since Vic died. I find that, slowly, two steps forward and one step back, I am able to follow my own advice. Here is what I tell myself.

It helps to create a plan. Know what, when, and where you're going to eat each day so that you are prepared to nourish yourself with healthy foods. Make an appointment with yourself for exercise. Put the time on your calendar and treat it as seriously as you would treat an appointment with a friend or a colleague.

If you aren't exercising, begin with a small, manageable commitment you can keep. Compared to nothing, a 15-minute walk three times a week is a big improvement. You may find that moving a little or being outside lifts your spirits. Perhaps you can combine exercise with supportive socialization by inviting a friend to join you. If you have a dog, consider yourself lucky, since you already have an enthusiastic walking partner who will gladly keep to your schedule.

With food, define your problem areas and stay alert. We live in an unhealthy food environment, and each of us needs to find a way to navigate our way through the sugar, salt, and fats. What if you don't have time to cook? Try carry-out at GreenStar or at Wegman's vegetarian or salad bar. What do you eat if you're on the road and there is nothing healthy available? This isn't a problem if you've planned ahead with healthy portable snacks like 1/4 c bags of nuts or fresh fruit.

If you're under-eating, overeating, or skipping the healthy options, be a loving but firm parent to yourself. It's up to each of us to stand up for our bodies, our health, and our well-being. Look at articles at my website www.elainemansfield.com for healthy options and supportive practical approaches to improving both diet and exercise.

Healthy food and regular exercise elevate our mood and give us vitality. Those of us who are mourning need all the help we can get. When there are so many things in life we can't control, this is one gift we can give ourselves and one place where we can choose to be in charge. If you take small steps toward better self-care, you'll feel more positive and hopeful in a matter of days. Best of all, you'll know that you have not given up on yourself or your future.

Elaine Mansfield is a writer, Hospicare volunteer, student of mythology, gardener, and caretaker of her home and land. She is also a nutritionist and exercise trainer. See her website www.elainemansfield.com for practical ideas about exercise and nutrition and easy healthy recipes. She was married for 40 years to Victor Mansfield until his death in June 2008.