

HOPE

For Bereaved, Inc.

A Journey from Grief to HOPE

WHAT HAPPENS NOW? ... AFTER YOUR SPOUSE DIES

By Kathleen Jacques

Facing the death of any loved one is devastating but the death of one's spouse may force you to adjust to more changes than any other singular event you'll ever experience. All at once you may have lost your life's partner, lover, father or mother of your children, breadwinner, confidant, your best friend. So much of your time, of your own history has been centered around this one person. Where do you go from here? How do you ever adjust to the magnitude of this loss?

Much has been written elsewhere about the phases of grief and mechanisms for coping. Rather than duplicate that material, I offer some reflections and suggestions aimed at the special circumstances of the widowed. I was twenty-eight when my husband, Michael, died. He was twenty-nine.

FEAR: Aside from sadness, the most overwhelming emotion I initially felt was fear. I didn't want to think, I didn't want to contemplate the consequences of what had happened. Time stood still for the first few days, moments felt like hours; I could not look ahead.

In those first few hours, few days, it is important to accept any assistance offered. Your family and friends need to express their love and concern; you need to conserve your emotional and physical resources. You need a "safe harbor." You become less afraid when you see the evidence of love and caring from those who gather around you in those early days; you are not alone.

PAINFUL REMARKS: People will say some pretty amazing things; "Your husband/wife is in a better place." "It was God's will." "Well, at least you had thirty years together." "You're young, you'll marry again." "God must have needed him/her in heaven." "At least you have the children." "Time will heal." Unless you've lost someone you loved, it's hard to grasp just how hollow these statements can seem. You did not want your spouse to die. You want him/her back. You hurt like hell. Period.

Believe it or not, the day may come when you'll laugh at some of those thoughtless remarks. Some of them can be pretty absurd. But please bear in mind that these remarks were indeed well intended. People really struggle with what to say to the bereaved, they simply don't know what to say. Feel sorry for them because someday they may be quite unprepared for a loss of their own, and they will learn a painful lesson from their own mistakes.

DECISIONS: There are so many details to attend to after the death of a spouse. Often the widowed plunge into these tasks, seeking refuge in time-consuming responsibilities. We ignore fatigue, nervousness, anger, moodiness, and physical ailments. Perhaps we think the world expects us to be stoic, valiant, examples of courage. Rubbish. Give yourself a break. Take time to grieve. There will be time enough later for finishing household projects, learning to cook, spring cleaning, enrolling in school, for making all those monumental decisions (should I move, sell the house, hire a housekeeper, invest the life insurance proceeds, seek vocational counseling, get a job?) Let your family, close friends, clergyman or lawyer help with some of the immediate tasks (the funeral and burial, child care, insurance matters, social security, the settling of accounts, bills) leaving you energy for the harder task of grief work that lies ahead.

Save major decisions for a later time when your vision is less clouded by anxiety and panic. Chances are you have far more options than you originally perceived. The world is full of stories of people who regret decisions they made in haste. Give yourself time.

REACTIONS: For some reason I cannot fathom, society treats the widowed like victims. Something was done TO us. People pity you. This can be a very unwelcome response. The widowed are treated differently from other bereaved people, as if someone had abandoned you; you are now seen differently. (The survivors of those who have died by suicide might recognize this response as well.) Bereaved people who have lost a child, parent, another relative or friend are seen as they were before, only now carrying a heavy burden of sorrow. But the widowed are seen as having altered their identity. No one wants to be an object of pity, nor do they want to be put on a pedestal. It is not heroic to be in mourning.

If someone close to you begins to hinder recovery by treating you in any of the ways described above, you may find it necessary to clear the air. If, for instance, the room becomes hushed when you enter, you might want to initiate conversation yourself. You may have to “educate” the people close to you on what is appropriate behavior towards you.

FIND A LISTENER: If it is difficult for you to tell others what your needs are during this period, or you face disillusion and a feeling of rejection. The widowed often lament, “No one understands how I feel.” When people start to treat you with kid gloves (or worse, avoid you altogether), you suffer a great loss of self-esteem. Instead of withdrawing, it is better for the widowed to seek out at least one other person to listen to what you may really be feeling behind the public façade of the “stiff upper lip.” If you’ve been conditioned all your life to keep your troubles to yourself you may be headed for a backlash of pain when the suppressed emotions of grief emerge later, as they surely will.

WHERE ARE MY FRIENDS: How many times have you innocently said to a friend, “Let’s get together for lunch/dinner/a movie/anything...,” only to fail to follow through? Well then, why do we expect it to be any different now when these statements are made soon after the death of a spouse? The hard reality is that you will indeed have lost some friends, too. Some people will not be able to deal with you; they cannot find the right things to say. They may see in your situation a foretelling of their own future; they avoid you so your “bad luck” will not rub off on them. Perhaps these were not strong friendships to begin with. Regardless, you must now concentrate on those

relationships that remain supportive. Forgive people their weaknesses. Their expressions of concern, although not acted upon, were genuine.

LONELINESS: Like Noah's Ark we see life's inhabitants as coming strictly in pairs. The checks still carry both names. "Couples Night" discounts, dinner parties for six/eight/twelve...always an even number. The years may seem to stretch out endlessly; all those vents, all those occasions unattended, unescorted, along. You feel like the proverbial square peg in a round hole. It takes a great deal of courage for a widow/widower to socialize again after the death of a spouse. That first family gathering or the company picnic can send you home in an agony of tears and loneliness.

The only effective way I've found to cope with and overcome this loneliness and alienation is to get out there and accept those invitations. Now of course, not all invitations, and not until you are ready. When you do socialize for the first time, expect it to be rough. Don't be afraid to leave early. If you start to cry, it's OK, it won't be unexpected, people will understand. The important thing to realize is that it will get easier. In time you will gravitate towards people who make you feel at ease, they will give you strength and help return laughter and pleasure to your life. Baby steps; start with social baby steps (tennis with a close friend, dinner with a co-worker...) and eventually you'll be able to handle larger groups, and new situations.

ME, A THREAT? Have you ever heard the one about the "Gay Divorcee" or the "Merry Widow?" Ha, pure invention. Nevertheless there will be women who will treat you as a threat near their husbands. Of course you don't want their husbands, even though you may temporarily envy their intact families. If anything, you hope they appreciate the husbands they have because you have learned how fragile life is. So, go ahead and feel annoyance at these insensitive sorts. Speak up if you are so inclined but better yet, turn to an understanding friend (or bring it up at your support group meeting, you're bound to generate laughter. "Why would I ever want THAT man?") to vent your frustration. Consider that some of these women might be insecure in their marriages. This is their problem; don't make it yours by taking their actions to heart. Consider the source.

EXPECTATIONS: The death of your spouse leaves you with a cornucopia of unfulfilled needs; emotional, physical, practical, intellectual, and social. It is hard to imagine all the slots your spouse once filled until the gaps stand testimony to your loss. Yet our need for intimacy persists, and we may experience disappointment when we turn to others to fill some of these voids. For instance, we may assume that our families or children will automatically be there for us, telepathically senses our moods, our emotional requirements. Since they're already so close to us, shouldn't they be able to sense when we need to talk or need to withdraw? They should be able to "read" us somewhat like our spouse did. Well this just is not so. Probably no one will have that intuitive sense the way your spouse did. Family and close friends will not be able to fill all the roles left by the death of your spouse. Rather than becoming angry at those closest to you for failing to anticipate and meet your unspoken needs, remember that you're asking the impossible. We all have limitations; people give according to their capacities. Be thankful for what is offered, and then find ways to meet some of those more pressing needs. Counseling may be helpful; sometimes an impartial ear frees you to open up in ways that you can't with your family.

SUPPORT GROUPS: One of the best things you might ever do for yourself is to summon your courage and attend a support group for the widowed. You'll discover a reservoir of sympathy, understanding, friendship, and information from people who have "walked in your shoes." They "speak the language." You won't be pressured to say a thing if you choose not to. You'll find comfort in discovering that you're not going crazy, other people out there have survived this roller-coaster ride of grief. They have struggled with the phases of grief like you and have endured. When you see that you are not alone, you will feel less alone. You will discover HOPE. Many widowed who have participated in these support groups make treasured friendships sealed by a special bond of understanding.

I realize that most of this article has been directed at women. There is no reason to presume that men don't feel the same sensations or experience the same turmoil. I am limited, however, by my own perspective as a female, and I am sorry if I have neglected any special concerns of the widower.

Kathleen Jacques is a member of Hope for Bereaved and is a freelance writer.

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Hope for Bereaved, Inc.
500 Onondaga Blvd.
Syracuse, NY 13219
Office: (315) 475-9675
Helpline: (315) 475-HOPE (4673)

www.hopeforbereaved.com/