

The Mourning After; Ten Healing Steps for Grieving Men

After a naval career spanning nearly 25 years, Bernard and Jeanne eagerly anticipated life together after military retirement. A few months after Bernard retired, however, Jeanne was diagnosed with cancer and died 13 months later. "Over the course of our marriage, we had endured many separations because of sea duty. Retirement was to be our time to make up, he sadly tells a friend. Now that Jeanne is gone, I'm plagued with troubling thoughts. Who am I without her? We were married nearly three decades. She was the stabilizing person in my life. Here I am, 56 and alone, and for the first time in my life, I'm very unsure of myself," he laments.

The death of someone we love is one of life's harshest blows. The following bereavement is often a lonely, torturous, frightening journey. Frequently, that journey from grief to healing is more acute for men than women because social networks are designed to deliver rapid support to women while men are approached more slowly and less directly. Like women, however, men can and do recover. Here are 10 steps to help men heal from the wound of grief.

- I. **Expect and accept emotional turmoil.** "I've been emotionally steady all my life. My children refer to me as the family Rock of Gibraltar. But since Karen's death six months ago, I feel like an emotional basket case," says Kenneth, a Midwest engineer. "I can well up with tears for no apparent reason, grow easily frustrated and anger quickly. And I cannot seem to concentrate or focus well," he adds.

The reality is that the death of a loved one often unleashes many unfamiliar and uncomfortable emotions, including shock, disbelief, numbness, guilt, regret, anger, loneliness, vulnerability, tears, panic, anxiety and intense sadness. Many grieverers are unable to sleep well and find their appetite is harshly curbed. Expect this emotional turmoil and accept the reactions as a normal and natural part of grieving. Remind yourself that the emotional storm will pass.

- II. **Become informed about grief.** Visit a library or bookstore and select books about bereavement and grief issues. Read everything you can about the grieving process. The information you read will empower and encourage you.

"Books were my lifeline," says one recent widower. "Every week, I set aside a day to make a trip to the library, where I carefully selected books that would inform or inspire me. The books were not only successful in touching my heart and inspiring me to continue, but they normalized the grieving process for me. By reading about the bereavement of others, I quickly learned that my emotional reactions were quite normal and that I wasn't going crazy."

Some exceptional books for men to read include *What Helped Me When My Loved One Died*, edited by Earl A. Grollman; *Giving Sorrow Words* by Candy Lightner and Nancy Hathaway; *Grief Relief: How to Overcome Loss and Live Again* by Victor M. Parachin; *Grief Quest: Reflections For Men Coping With Loss* by Robert J. Miller; *Letting Go With Love: The Grieving Process* by Nancy O Connor; and *Winning Life's Toughest Battles* by Dr. Julius Segal.

- III. **Commit to adapting and adjusting.** During World War II, a young American lieutenant was stationed in England. Their bomber bases, hacked out of the sodden English countryside, were seas of mud. On the ground, people were cold, miserable and homesick. In the air, people were getting shot, replacements were few and morale was low," the man recalls.

One sergeant, however, a crew chief, was always cheerful, good-humored and smiling. Intrigued by his positive attitude, one day the lieutenant observed the sergeant as he struggled in freezing rain to salvage a plane that had skidded off the runway into an apparently bottomless mire. He was whistling cheerfully. "Sergeant, how can you whistle in a mess like this?" the man asked. Giving him a mud-caked grin, the sergeant said, "Lieutenant, when the facts won't budge, you have to bend your attitude to fit the facts. That's all there is to it." The sergeant's words are good advice for grieving men. Because we cannot reverse the painful loss of a loved one to death, we must adapt and adjust our attitudes in order to manage and grow through the grief process.

IV. **Adopt the survivor attitude.** Bereavement causes an internal emotional war between feelings of hope and despair, anxiety and acceptance, so adopt a survivor's attitude. In her book, *Coming Back: Rebuilding Lives After Crisis and Loss*, Ann Kaiser Stearns, Ph.D., interviewed people who turned their tragedies, disappointments and losses into victories. She identified these attitudes as common to survivors:

- I will examine the future.
- I will not be defeated.
- I will take advantage of available opportunities. There must be some meaning to be found in these events.
- I will not assume the victim posture.
- I can do it if I set my mind to it.
- I must be willing to expand.
- I will accept life's challenge.
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V. **Get physical.** In the opinion of Harvard-educated physician Andrew Weil, author of numerous best-selling books, exercise is the best antidepressant. "Aerobic exercise is actually the best antidepressant I know of, provided it is done vigorously and often enough," he says. In addition to its many well-known effects on the body, it increases production of endorphins, the brain's opiate-like molecule that is associated with some of our best natural highs. To gain maximum benefit from exercise, Dr. Weil advises 30 minutes of sustained aerobic activity at least five days a week. The effort must be sufficient to increase the heart rate, accelerate breathing and cause perspiration.

VI. **Don't be the "Lone Ranger".** Bereavement is an isolating experience. Loneliness becomes acute because your beloved partner has died. Do not complicate bereavement by becoming the "Lone Ranger". Instead, reach out to trusted family and friends. Here is sound advice from Candy Lightner and Nancy Hathaway, authors of *Giving Sorrow Words*. "Discuss your feelings with other people. It is not sufficient to recognize them yourself; it is better to share them. Spend time with supportive people, not only because it helps reduce loneliness but also because those people can help you put your feelings into perspective. Talking about your feelings with someone who is willing to listen can be enormously consoling, especially if that person has experienced a death similar to the one for which you are grieving."

VII. **Seek supportive people.** You will recognize those who truly want to be supportive because their responses will be helpful and validating. People who will support you use sentences such as:

- I'm sorry.
- How can I help? What can I do?
- Tell me more.

- This must be very hard for you.
- It's okay to cry.
- Call me whenever you want to talk.
- You are in my thoughts and prayers.

VIII. **Limit your conversations with those who do not understand grief.** The death of your loved one will make others uncomfortable. Some people do not know what to say or how to act so they often respond in clumsy, inappropriate ways. There is no point in opening up and sharing with people who are unable to help because such individuals will often respond in hurtful ways. Some hurtful comments include:

- You should not feel that way.
- You can always get married again.
- Forget about it. You have to get on with life.
- Let's not talk about that!
- You are lucky. It could have been much worse.
- You are just feeling sorry for yourself.

IX. **Join a support group.** One of the best steps a man can take on the path to recovery is joining a support group. A self-help or support group is made up of people who are in the same situation and therefore able to listen and empathize, as well as provide support and guidance. Rabbi Earl Grollman, an author and bereavement educator, describes the importance of a grief support group. "At some point, you may be disappointed in the reaction of your acquaintances, maybe even your close friends. You just do not hear from them very often anymore. They seem awkward and uneasy in your presence. Death is probably frightening to them. They may avoid your company. That is why self-help groups have been successful in providing the necessary emotional intervention through the crisis of death. People in these groups understand your fears and frustrations; they have been there before. Allow them to help you out of your isolation with a meaningful support network. Often, these sufferers become closer to you than your own family and friends. They share with you during the time of your grief and help you walk on your sorrowing path. You are no longer alone."

X. **Be patient with yourself.** There is no quick fix for bereavement. Despite your best efforts, the process of adjustment and recovery is slow and agonizing. There may be weeks at a time when you are unable to discern any progress but rest assured that you are gradually healing. Be patient with yourself. Do not place too much pressure on yourself to heal rapidly. "Give yourself time to move through grief at your own pace and in your own individual way," advises Robert DiGiulio, author of the book *Beyond Widowhood*. DiGiulio also offers this personal insight. "My wife's death thrust me into new, awkward roles and responsibilities. I tried not to expect too much of myself too soon, just to start the small tasks first and to be patient with myself and my mistakes. I discovered routine tasks, such as maintaining my job and family, helped restore in my life that familiar structure which the chaos of grief threatened to destroy."

By taking these steps, men can ensure a healthy bereavement and the completion of the grief process. Like others before them, they will make the transition from anxiety to acceptance and from pain to peace and will, in fact, heal from the deep wound of grief.

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