

THE MOURNING AFTER

Ten steps men can take to help them heal from the wound of grief.

After a naval career that spanned nearly 25 years, Bernard and Jeanne were eagerly anticipating life together following military retirement. They had been planning for this time their whole married life. Then, a few months after Bernard retired, Jeanne was diagnosed with cancer. She 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 years old and alone. For the first time in my life, I’m very unsure of myself,” he laments.

The death of a person we love is one of life’s harshest blows. The bereavement that follows is often a lonely, torturous, frightening journey. And that journey from grief to healing is frequently 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. Yet men, like women, can and do heal. These 10 steps won’t eliminate your grief, but they will help facilitate your recovery.

1. *Expect and accept emotional turmoil.* “All my life I’ve been emotionally steady. 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 former Marine now engineer. “For no apparent reason, I can well up with tears. I am easily frustrated and anger quickly. I can’t seem to concentrate or focus well,” he adds. The death of a loved one often unleashes many unfamiliar and uncomfortable emotions. There can be shock, disbelief, numbness, guilt, regret, anger, loneliness, vulnerability, tears, panic, anxiety, and intense sadness. Many grieving people are unable to sleep well and find their appetite is significantly 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.

2. *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. “I set aside a day each week to make a trip to the library, and 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 on, 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 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 Julius Segal.

3. *Commit to adapting and adjusting.* During World War II, a young American lieutenant was stationed in England. Bomber bases, hacked out of the sodden English countryside, were seas of mud. “On the ground, people were cold, miserable, homesick. In the air, people were getting shot. Replacements were few, morale was low.” The man recalls.

However, there was one sergeant—a crew chief—who was always cheerful, always good-humored, always smiling. The lieutenant was intrigued by the positive attitude and observed him one day as the sergeant struggled in a freezing rain to salvage a plane that had skidded off the runway into apparently bottomless mire. He was whistling cheerfully. “Sergeant, how can you whistle in a mess like

this?" the man asked. The sergeant gave him a mud-caked grin and 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: When the facts won't budge, you have to bend your attitude to fit the facts. 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.

4. *Adopt the survivor's attitude.* Bereavement causes an emotional civil war, with feelings of hope and despair, anxiety and acceptance frequently battling each other. Adopt a survivor's attitude. For her book *Coming Back: Rebuilding Lives After Crisis and Loss*, Ann Kaiser Stearns, Ph.D., interviewed people whose tragedies, disappointments, and losses were turned into victories. She identifies the following attitudes as common to survivors:

- I will vividly 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 have to be willing to expand; and
- I will accept life's challenge.

5. *Get physical.* Exercise is the best antidepressant available, according to Harvard-educated Andrew Weil, M.D., author of numerous best-selling books. "Aerobic exercise is actually the best antidepressant I know, provided it is done vigorously enough and often enough," he says. "In addition to its many well-known effects on the body, it increases production of endorphins, the brain's own opiate-like molecules that are associated with some of our best natural highs." To gain the maximum benefit from exercise, Weil advises 30 minutes of sustained aerobic activity at least five days a week. The effort must be great enough to get the heart rate up, accelerate breathing, and cause perspiration.

6. *Don't be the "Lone Ranger."* Bereavement is an isolating experience. Loneliness becomes acute because your beloved partner has died. Do not complicate the bereavement by being the "Lone Ranger." Reach out to trusted family and friends. Here is sound advice from Lightner and Hathaway's book, *Giving Sorrow Words*: "Discuss your feelings with other people. It's not sufficient to recognize them yourself; it's better to share them.

"Spend time with supportive people, not only because it helps in reducing loneliness but also because those people can help put your feelings into perspective. Talking out 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 you are grieving."

7. *Seek out supportive people.* You will recognize those who try are supportive because their responses will be helpful and validating. People who support you use sentences such as these when speaking with you:

- I'm sorry;
- Tell me more;
- This must be very hard for you;
- It's OK to cry;
- You are in my thoughts and prayers;
- Call me whenever you want to talk; and
- What can I do to help?

8. *Limit your conversations with those who just don't understand grief.* The death of your loved one will make others uncomfortable. Some people don't know what to say or how to act, so they often respond in clumsy, inappropriate ways. Such individuals may respond to you in ways that are hurtful. Don't feel obligated to spend time with well-intentioned people who aren't able to help you or who make you feel worse. Some hurtful comments include statements such as:

- You shouldn't feel that way;
- You can always get married again;
- You've got to get on with life;
- Let's not talk about that;
- You're lucky. It could have been much worse; and
- You're just feeling sorry for yourself.

9. *Join a support group.* One of the best steps a man can take on the path to recovery is to join a support group. A self-help or support group is made up of people who are in the same situation and, therefore, are able to listen, empathize, and provide invaluable support and guidance.

Rabbi Earl Grollman, an author and bereavement educator describes the importance of a grief support group this way: "At some point, you may be disappointed in the reactions of your acquaintances, maybe even your close friends. You just don't hear from them so often anymore. They seem awkward and uneasy in your presence. Death is probably frightening to them. They may avoid your company. That's 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 the time of your grief and help you walk on your sorrowing path. You are no longer alone."

10. *Be patient with yourself.* There is no quick fix for bereavement. Despite your best efforts, the process of recovery can be a slow, agonizing one. There may be weeks at a time when you are unable to discern any progress. Be assured, however, that you are gradually healing. "Give yourself time to move through grief at your own pace, in your own individual way," advises Robert DiGiulio, author of *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 with the small tasks first, to be patient with myself and my mistakes. I discovered that the routine tasks of maintaining my job and family helped restore in my life that familiar structure that the chaos of grief threatened to destroy."

Finally, by taking these steps, you ensure you will have a healthy bereavement and complete the grief process. Like others before you, you will make the transition from anxiety to acceptance and from pain to peace. You will heal from the deep wound of grief.

Victor M. Parachin, "The Retired Officer Magazine," August 1998