

FINDING YOUR WAY

WEB SITES

WidowNet: An information and self-help resource for and by widows, and widowers; covers grief, bereavement and recovery; www.widownet.org

Growth House: Offers links to many bereavement sites, including those specializing in diversity; www.growthhouse.org

AARP: Widowed Persons Service; 601 E St. N.E., Washington, D.C. 20049; (800) 424-3410; www.aarp.org/griefandloss/

The Compassionate Friends: For parents who have lost a child; P.O. Box 3696, Oak Brook, Ill. 60522; (877) 969-0010; www.compassionatefriends.org

BOOKS

"Nobody's Child Anymore: Grieving, Caring and Comforting When Parents Die," by Barbara Bartocci (Sorin Books, 2000; \$11.95)



"The Mourning Handbook: A Complete Guide for the Bereaved," by Helen Fitzgerald (Simon & Schuster, 1994; \$22)

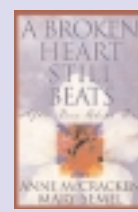
"Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go," by Molly Fumia (Conari Press, 1992; \$10.95)



"Living When a Loved One Has Died," by Earl Grollman (Beacon Press, 1995; \$10)

"When Bad Things Happen to Good People," by Harold Kushner (Avon, 1994; \$5.99)

"A Broken Heart Still Beats: After Your Child Dies," by Anne McCracken and Mary Semel (Hazelden Information Education, 2000; \$15)



"Surviving Grief And Learning to Live Again," by Catherine M. Saunders, (John Wiley & Sons, 1992; \$17.95)

For more resources, go online to www.findingourway.net

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marcia Lattanzi-Licht is a psychotherapist and consultant in Boulder, Colo. Lattanzi-Licht has published widely in the areas of coping with professional stress, loss and bereavement care. She is the principal author of "The Hospice Choice: In Pursuit of a Peaceful Death."



Daryl Kipke's father died of prostate cancer last year. "I never really knew what forever meant until my dad died," he said. "I can't believe that I'll never see him again." Though his wife and five children — including Jasmine, 7, Levi, 5, and Isabel, 3 — supported him, Kipke often found himself diving into his work and keeping his thoughts mostly to himself.

Living with loss

Bereaved swim against tide of grief

BY MARCIA LATTANZI-LICHT

There was a time when my grief was so loud I could barely stand the noise.

A drunken driver killed my daughter, Ellen, when she was 17. I remember the physical blow of hearing she was dead. I couldn't catch my breath and I couldn't stop crying. It seemed as if someone had set off a bomb that destroyed the house of my life.

Everywhere I looked, there was loss. The land of grief, with its sorrowful valleys and mountains that seem too high to climb, is a destination all humans eventually find. Its hallmarks are a sense of shock and numbness, a feeling of being alone and a desolation that searches for meaning.

"It's like a nightmare, and I kept hoping to wake up," said Marlene Wilson of Boulder, Colo., whose husband died suddenly.

"I never really knew what forever meant until my dad died," said Daryl Kipke of Tempe, Ariz., whose father died of prostate cancer at 65. "I can't believe that I'll never see him again."

As 76 million baby boomers creep up the ladder of years, grief is there to meet them. More than 2.3 million people die in the United States each year. Almost a million people are widowed, and those who die usually leave behind adult children. As the U.S. population ages, more Americans are experiencing firsthand the pangs of grief, which knows no racial, financial or religious boundaries.

Yet, how a society handles grief is not just an individual challenge but also a collective one. American emphasis on the quick fix creates impatience with grieving and a low tolerance for the slow journey through sorrow. The language of "closure" falsely suggests that grief can be neatly wrapped up and put away. Families are often scattered across the country, making the reality of the loss remote for the individual's loved ones. Yet, grief is an experience that permanently changes us.

When my daughter died in 1985, my thinking was scattered, and I felt like an animal prowling, trying to protect what was left of my world. I wished I could trade my life for Ellen's, but I wasn't given that choice. I re-

alized how limited and powerless I was. As much as I loved Ellen, I could not keep her alive. My faith was shaken. Suddenly my life was smaller and poorer, and I felt a crushing burden of sorrow weighing on me.

The only reason to keep on was that her brother, Steve, 16, needed me.

I also was angry. Ellen's death was the result of someone else's irresponsible behavior. I felt cheated out of a lifetime with her. And I was angry for Ellen's brother, who not only lost his best friend but also was now an only child.

Yet, I could see that it was painful for others to see the depth of my anger and sorrow. That led me to keep my grief quiet, except with the people I could trust to listen. Why? I realized that people judge how well someone is doing in mourning by the degree to which they do not show tears.

My experience was not unique. Although Daryl Kipke was 37 years old when his father, Charles, died last year, the void left him stunned and bereft. He'd lost his mentor and friend.

"Who will be excited in the way dad was to hear about my next project, my successes, or help me sort through ideas? I thought we would have a lot more time together," Kipke said. He was especially heartbroken that his father would miss seeing a brand-new granddaughter, Tessa Rose, grow up.

Kipke did some things that helped him cope and comprehend the reality of his loss. He went to Michigan to help make the decision with his family to end his dad's life support. Afterward, he found comfort in writing the obituary. He visited a ballpark his dad had helped design to gain inspiration for the eulogy.

But even though his five children and wife, Paula, supported and stood by him at the funeral, Kipke had a hard time talking much about his sorrow. He knew his wife was grieving in her own way, as women do, by expressing her emotions and seeking out relationships. There were times Kipke could not do that. Like many men, he dove into his work and kept his thoughts mostly to himself. He tried to be strong for his mother, although even that hurt.

"It was difficult for me to see my mother alone when she visited during the holidays. I

was used to being with my parents as a couple. They should have been able to grow old together," he said. "At 64, my mom was too young to be a widow."

One of the most difficult parts of grief is this: It makes us feel so alone. When loved ones die, survivors may feel powerless, angry or shaken by a loss of innocence. The random and cruel reality of illnesses and accidents challenges us to feel safe in the world. Good and caring people die of heart attacks, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Beautiful daughters die in automobile accidents.

The paradox of grief? Just when we need the most support, it can interfere with our ability to be close to others. We long for closeness, but yet being close to others reminds us that we can lose anyone and everyone we love. And grief leaves us feeling diminished.

Experts will tell you that grief is not an illness or a disease, but a process. It is isolating for people who experience the death of a loved one to have others dismiss the importance of mourning or urge them to "get over" their loss so they can return to "normal." In the land of grief, mourning does not have a timetable. The only thing it requires of us is that we learn to absorb the loss, remember our loved ones and learn to live well with, and in spite of, our losses.

Friends, family and a faith community can walk with us. If we still struggle, counselors, doctors and support groups can help. As others hold us up, time passes. Gradually, we realize that the compassion of others often comes from empathy. They have been there, too.

"It's as though people who have lost someone precious speak a different language," said a young mother in Boulder, Colo., whose daughter died of sudden infant death syndrome in 1994. "I don't have to explain things. There is a clear understanding that is so comforting."

Across time, the one thing that helped me to live without Ellen was the unwavering caring and support that surrounded me. It softened the sharpness of the tragedy of Ellen's death by reminding me that there were many good and loving people in the world. The greatest learning I've had as I've lived with Ellen's death is that no one makes it through a painful time alone.

People acknowledged the importance of the loss in a number of ways: attending the funeral or memorial service, visiting, sending

cards, flowers, notes, bringing food, and phone calls. The faces of friends and neighbors told me how difficult it was for them to take in the reality of Ellen's death. In spite of their own sorrow, and the way the loss mirrored in their lives, they came.

The thing people offered that helped the most was the ability to listen in a non-judgmental way. And they were present, walking with me through the long journey of mourning. They helped me discover that I never had to like what happened to Ellen, but I needed to find ways to live with the experience. Most of all, they invited me to be a part of the world again.

My grief was most intense in the early weeks and months. Sixteen years later, I still have moments when I wish I could be with Ellen, to talk, laugh, disagree, shop, cook, or just be together. I miss the years we didn't have together, her career, wedding, grandchildren, and most of all, the ordinary family times.

When I think about how I have learned to live with loss, I remember a phone conversation with my grandmother two days after Ellen's death. She listened and cried with me. Then she spoke of her sister's death in a tragic fire when they were children. She said to me, "Marcia, never make Steve feel bad that he's still alive." My grandmother was reminding me that my job was to love my son well and the other people who were here to love. That does not mean that she was telling me to forget Ellen, and "put the past behind me." Rather, she was telling me how the losses of her life had shaped her and influenced the woman she became.

Today, I enjoy my life and am incredibly grateful for my many blessings. Ellen was one of the great gifts of my life. There continues to be an empty space in my life without her. And yet, all the other parts of my life remain sweet, and perhaps more so with time. Ellen's death has shown me the depth of caring and compassion that exists in others. The support and love of friends and family continues to be one of the richest parts of my life.

One thing is clear. Even though Ellen is gone, the love I feel for her hasn't died. No amount of time can alter that. That love continues on inside me, like a song that plays on, quietly, in the background of my days.

For more resources and contacts on end-of-life issues, go to www.findingourway.net.



Ellen Lattanzi

Answers to aid those coping with the death of a loved one

Here are questions and answers to help you through the death of a loved one:

What influences how we grieve? It depends not only on the age of the person who died, your relationship with him or her and the circumstances of death but also on your own age and life experience, how much support you have, your beliefs and your personality.

What does it feel like to grieve? You may experience any or all of the following: guilt or anger, restlessness; a sense of unreality about the loss; difficulty sleeping; eating and concentrating; mood changes; a loss of energy; constant thoughts of the person who died; and a need to talk about him or her.

How do we "get over" grief? Grief is not an illness or disease to conquer. It is the response to loss. There is no timetable for grief. How soon you integrate the loss and learn to live with it depends on your relationship to the person who died and your own adjustment to the empty space he or she left behind. Be prepared for the fact that grief changes you.

What is the best way to support someone who is grieving? Acknowledge the importance of the loss by attending the funeral or with calls, notes, visits or memorial donations. Offer practical help of meals, rides or babysitting. Be available to listen. Talk about the person who died, remembering personal qualities, stories or moments shared.

What should you never say to a person who has lost a loved one? Never tell the person to think of things to be grateful for (no more suffering, remaining children, years shared, etc.) Never tell the person to hide grief, stop feeling grief or that it's time to "get back to normal."

What steps should an employer take when an employee loses a spouse or child? Employers can help by inquiring about the loss, listening and being open to negotiating time off during the first year after the death.

What are some ways to help children grieve? Depending on their developmental stage, they may have a hard time grasping

the concept of death's permanence. Children also tend to move in and out of grief; one minute they seem fine and the next they don't. In general, explain as much as you can in a way they will understand. Don't lie or hide the truth. Let them ask questions and give them plenty of time to talk. Try to maintain your family routines and rules. Tell your child that you feel sad and are grieving, and that it is OK if they feel the same way. But don't lean on him or her for support. Get counseling for yourself, so you can be stronger for your child. Tell your child's teacher what has happened. And try to make sure many caring people are available to your child.

Are there resources on the Web that can help grieving people? Yes, but do not

let Web-based grief sites substitute for personal interaction with others. Also, be wary of Web sites that try to take advantage of your bereavement, particularly ones that want to sell you something — memory quilts made out of the loved one's clothes, candles, journals, commemorative lighted portraits, memorial trees or vanity press biographies. If you see the words, "A Treasured Gift for Those Who Mourn," hold on to your wallet.

Where can I get help? Look for bereavement support close to home first. Contact your church, synagogue or mosque; hospices and hospitals; mental health or counseling centers; funeral homes or local aging organizations.

— Marcia Lattanzi-Licht