



FINDING YOUR WAY

COPING TIPS

Every bereaved spouse has to work through grief and loss in his or her own way, but here are some general tips:



Take control of your financial resources. If your spouse was employed, seek help from his or her company's human resources department. As soon as possible, find a financial adviser, make a budget, visit a tax accountant or lawyer. Contact the Social Security office for information and current rules about benefits for yourself and your children.



Maintain as much stability in your life as possible for a while; don't quit your job, sell your house or move right away.



Take care of yourself. Eat a healthy diet, exercise and get enough sleep.

BOOKS

"Letters to My Husband," by Fern Field Brooks (Career Press, 1995; \$19.99).



"I'm Grieving As Fast As I Can: How Young Widows and Widowers Can Cope and Heal," by Linda Feinberg (New Horizon Press, 1994; \$14.95).



"Widow to Widow: Thoughtful, Practical Ideas for Rebuilding Your Life," by Genevieve Davis Gisburg (Fisher Books, 1999; \$12.95).



"Widowing: Surviving the First Year," by Jane Krimbill and Nancy Brown, (Magoo Ltd. Midland, 1995; \$9.95).



"Doors Close, Doors Open: Widows, Grieving and Growing," by Morton Lieberman (Putnam, 1996; \$23.95).



"A Decembered Grief: Living With Loss While Others Are Celebrating," by Harold Ivan Smith (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 1999; \$12.99).

WEB SITES

Society of Military Widows/National Association of Uniformed Services Inc., 5535 Hempstead Way, Springfield, Va. 22151; (703) 750-1342; www.naus.org



AARP Grief and Loss Programs, 601 E Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20049; (202) 434-2260; Order "On Being Alone" (D150); "Men and Grief" (D17008) and "Special Issues for Younger Widowed Persons" (D17009) by mailing a postcard or letter to AARP Fulfillment, 601 E Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20049; www.aarp.org/griefandloss



Hospice Foundation of America, 2001 S Street NW #300, Washington, D.C. 20009; (202) 638-5419; www.hospicefoundation.org



National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, 1901 N. Moore, No. 90, Arlington, Va. 22209; (800) 658-8898; www.NHPCO.org



Parents Without Partners Inc., 1650 S. Dixie Highway, Suite 510, Boca Raton, Fla. 33432; (561) 391-8833; www.parentswithoutpartners.org



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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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PHOTO BY DON IPOCK/KRT

For years after her husband Bud's death in 1992, Bonnie Story, shown with two of her grandchildren, felt "completely alone and without direction — rudderless."

# Who am I now?

## Bereaved partners face the unknown

BY MYRA CHRISTOPHER

*You think that their dying is the worst thing that could happen. Then they stay dead.*

— "Distressed Haiku," written by Donald Hall shortly after the death of his wife, poet Jane Kenyon.

NO one who knew Bonnie and Bud Story was surprised when, after Bud was diagnosed with esophageal cancer in 1992, Bonnie quit teaching and dropped everything to devote all of her energy to her husband's care. After all, she had taken care of Bud most of her life.

Their grandfathers had gone to business school together and had been friendly competitors in the small town of Charleston, Mo. Their mothers had been pregnant at the same time and had joked about which of them would be born first. Bonnie won, by four days.

They napped in the same crib. Growing up, they played together and were in the same classes. They dated off and on in high school and married before they finished college, settling in Charleston and raising crops and four children.

For the 18 months that Bud fought for his life, Bonnie did what everyone knew she would. Whether at home, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., or at an alternative cancer treatment clinic in Mexico, she knew exactly how to be Mrs. Albert Loebe Story Jr. She learned quickly how to be a caregiver and an advocate for her husband.

After Bud died, she didn't take to her next role quite so quickly.

"For a whole year all I wanted to do was sleep and stare at the television," Bonnie said. "I don't even like television. I was numb. I just didn't know what to do.

"I was so busy searching for something — what to do, where to go. For the first time in my life I felt completely alone and without direction — rudderless."

Members of their close-knit community were stunned when Bonnie not only didn't go back to teaching after Bud died, but picked up and moved from Charleston. First she moved to Cape Girardeau, Mo., 40 miles away, and then to Martha's Vineyard to work in a seaside gift shop. "It was an attempt to leave my hurt behind," she said.

It turned out that when she lost Bud, Bonnie had lost many of her friends, too. Couples they had been friends with for years stopped calling, she said. She thought people wanted to avoid her.

"It was like my pain was too much for them," she said, "or that maybe it was contagious." In her new surroundings, Bonnie found new friends — "divorcees and other women I would never have been friends with before."

Bonnie's experience isn't out of the ordinary for the 1 million Americans who are widowed each year — and those numbers are growing fast, fueled by the ubiquitous Baby Boomers. The Social Security Administration projects that by 2010, nearly 1,050,000 Americans will lose spouses each year, and by 2030 that number is expected to grow to more than 1.5 million. And these figures don't factor in deaths of partners in committed non-traditional relationships.

Those left behind face redefining their lives to deal in new ways with family and friends, as well as unresolved feelings and regrets left over from marriage, according to Dr. Morton Lieberman, director of the Aging

and Mental Health Program at the University of California at San Francisco, in his book, "Doors Close, Doors Open: Widows, Grieving and Growing."

A brochure provided by AARP's Grief and Loss Program advises, "As time progresses, you will feel less intense pain, but you will never forget. You will never be your old self again (you have had a major life change), but you can be a different self who is 'OK.'"

Statistically, the job of rebuilding is left to wives. Sixty-nine percent of people left behind when a spouse dies are women. And the numbers play havoc with the image of the frail, elderly widow. According to the National Vital Statistics Report, there are currently 500,000 widows under the age of 45 in the United States, many with children, leading to more complex issues.

Shellie Gill is one of them. Shellie was only 36 when her husband, Joe, died suddenly of a rare strep infection in February, leaving behind their daughter, Madeline, 7, and 3-year-old son, Stephen. A few weeks after Joe's death, Shellie described their children as "the only bright spot ... the reason I make myself get up in the morning; the reason I make myself eat and dress and bathe. It's good that I have them.

"We balanced each other," Shellie said. "Joe brought something to the kids that I don't think I can. I am the serious one — 'brush your teeth, drink your milk'; he brought them laughter and fun. He made us a

family.

"I know how to turn off the water and light the pilot light, but I don't know how to comfort Maddie when she says, 'My Daddy will never see me in braces.' Or what to say to Stephen when he cries at night and says, 'But my Daddy wants to come home.'"

At night when the children go to sleep, Shellie faces her own grief.

She desperately misses the way "Joe felt — his eyebrows and his hands." A few weeks after Joe's death, Shellie found a tape recording of Joe and Stephen singing "Tomorrow" from the musical "Annie." "I just lost it," she said.

Because Joe's death is so recent, Shellie is just beginning to reach out for help. "I realize I need help and want all of it I can get," she said, so she is seeing a professional counselor and takes the kids to Solace House, a grief and bereavement program for children and their families in Kansas City, Mo.

Older widows with little education or financial means sometimes surprise themselves and everyone around them by bucking the odds and starting over.

Six years ago, when Teresa Serda lost her husband of 42 years, their 16 children were grown and she was a long way from Mexico, where she had grown up "very, very poor." When they married, he was widowed and had six children. She was only 21.

Teresa knew that she would have to support herself when her husband died and that it would not be easy. She had no formal edu-

cation and couldn't drive or read. So her dying husband was surprised when she told him she planned to get a job, and didn't want "to cook or to clean."

It was a bold idea for a woman who had never gone to the grocery store without her husband. But within a year she was true to her word. Teresa now works at a community center that provides social services to Spanish-speaking people. She lives alone with her dog, Maggie, and her parakeet, Charlie.

"I started working and working every day. And my son can't believe it that I work. He said, 'Oh, Mom, why do you work?' I use him for my ride and sometimes I don't have a ride and I pay a cab. ... If I am not sick, I'm here every day ... and, you know, my life gets better and better and better."

One of her daughters recently gave her the highest praise: "I think Dad is proud of you." Men who are widowed face a different set of stresses, proven by their death rate, which is three times higher than that for women in the same circumstances, according to AARP.

Typically, men have two things working against healing: They don't expect to live longer than their wives, and their socialization and training tell them that they should be strong and silent. Often they have lost the only person in the world to whom they are comfortable confiding their feelings at a time when it is critically important to have someone to talk to.

When Michael Goshorn's wife was diagnosed with cancer in late 1992, the couple found plenty of information online about her disease and support groups. So, when she died in January 1993, he turned to the Web again, but this time he didn't find what he needed — information that addressed specific issues about widowhood for men.

When he couldn't find the resources he needed, he created them in the form of www.WidowNet.org, a comprehensive site that provides practical information and self-help. The site includes a message board and sections with titles like "Dumb Remarks and Stupid Questions" and "Getting Through the Holidays," as well as links to help men grapple with their new identities.

Building a new life or finding new meaning sometimes requires just taking another approach to your "old" life.

After Bonnie Story moved from Charleston, she got help from a professional counselor who helped her deal with intense feelings of anger, a feeling many widows say takes control of their lives.

"I wasn't angry at God, and I certainly wasn't angry at Bud," she said. "I was just angry — angry at everyone and about everything."

The counselor helped her to realize that her feelings "weren't weird, that I wasn't going crazy."

Counseling and reading gave Bonnie some ideas about how to find her new self: Bonnie without Bud.

Bonnie began to realize that "you have to find some major reason you are still here." She found that reason in the life she had lived before Bud died.

Two years ago, Bonnie moved back to Charleston and started teaching again. "To impact the lives of thirteen or fourteen kids each year — that's important enough." Recently, she had a two-hour lunch with a friend from whom she had felt estranged since Bud died. She now believes they will build a new friendship.

"I know that I will never get over my loss," Bonnie said. "But I've found ease in my heart and freedom in my life."



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

## Widowhood Q&A

**Q: Should I still wear my wedding ring?**

**A:** There is no such thing as "wedding ring etiquette." Do what makes you most comfortable. Some widows place their wedding rings on their right hand, others remove their rings, sometimes saving them for future generations. Some have their rings fashioned into a special new piece of jewelry and others wear their rings all their lives.

**Q: What should I do with my spouse's clothes?**

**A:** This is a special concern to most widows. Trust yourself to know when the time is right to dispense with the personal belongings. Some people give them to family and friends, others to charitable organizations. This task doesn't have to be done all at once. It usually helps to go through belongings with a friend or family member so you can share memories and stories — it may make the task less distressing.

**Q: How can I get others to talk about my deceased spouse?**

**A:** People are afraid that any mention will make you sad. They feel uncomfortable and don't know what to say. You can help them and yourself by sharing memories of your loved one with them. You might open the door by saying, "Remember when Jim ...?" Or be direct and simply say to friends and family that you want to talk about your loved one and want others to do so, too.

**Q: How can I get through birthdays, anniversaries, holidays and other special events?**

**A:** For most people, special occasions are difficult, especially the first ones following a loved one's death. Anticipate that they may be difficult and prepare yourself. It's fine to put traditions in mothballs to be recycled when you feel stronger, or to create new traditions. Try a diversion, such as

a family trip or volunteering time at a social service agency that helps others during the holidays. Visit the cemetery or site where your loved one's ashes were scattered. Prayers, toasts and other tributes in your loved one's honor also may be helpful.

**Q: When should I start dating?**

**A:** The traditional one-year period of mourning is usually observed. However, some people may choose to seek companionship earlier — and some may never choose to do so. Only you will know when the time is right. It's important to remember that you are vulnerable and to be cautious.

**Q: Should I attend a bereavement support group?**

**A:** Everyone needs help from others during times of intense grief. Most people rely on the support of friends and family. Some seek counseling from clergy or other spiritual advisers. To find a support group, contact local faith communities, the YMCA, YWCA, a local hospice, or contact Widowed Person's Service of AARP at (202) 434-2260. Support groups aren't for everyone. So if you try and it doesn't feel right or seem to help, don't feel badly about dropping out.

**Q: How will I know when I'm getting better?**

**A:** Many experts encourage widows to keep a journal. Periodically reading earlier entries provides tangible evidence of improvement. As one participant in a chat room for young widows said, "You know you are getting better when you wake up one morning and don't have to force yourself to breathe." Another milestone is when you can talk about memories with a smile instead of tears. Remember: Things will never be the same, but you can and will feel happiness again.