

It's very hard to explain to children why Grandpa or Grandma isn't there to play with them any more. But the children in our church have been able to grasp the concept of Jesus being their "Forever Friend". There are books geared for children that can explain that a child's loved one has crossed the "Rainbow Bridge" and has gone to live with Jesus.

Finally, and this is odd advice, coming from one who goes around with her foot perpetually in her mouth, but when you are talking to the newly bereaved, try to be sure your brain is fully engaged before you put your mouth in motion.

Sue  
July 2004

Widow Net site address: [www.widownet.org](http://www.widownet.org)

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## **WHEN A FRIEND'S SPOUSE DIES**

**One Woman's Opinions of how to help,  
and what NOT say to the  
newly bereaved**

By  
Sue McKinnis

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## FINAL THOUGHTS

On WidowNet one night, there was quite a discussion as to why death was so difficult to talk about. The theory was put forth that in the 19th Century, and the first part of the 20th, death was part of everyday life. People got sick at home, were nursed at home, and died at home. But with modern science, came the "sanitizing" of it. Fewer and fewer people die at home. Fewer people (I'd say almost none, in this part of the country) are "Laid out" at home. We now live far longer than those of the 19th century could even imagine.

I think, because of this, Death has become spooky and mysterious, and something to be feared. Since we don't talk about it, except in an abstract way, we aren't familiar with it. Since people are living longer, a child may be a grown-up with children of his own before anyone close dies. So naturally, nobody knows how to react.

And our euphemisms for death don't help, either. I have refused to use "passed on", "passed away" or "passed". Don did none of those things. He died. End of the earthly story. I did use the term "lost Don" when I felt the person I was speaking to wasn't prepared for the bare term "died", but that was to spare their feelings. I didn't lose anything. I know exactly where he is.

Maybe if we quit treating death as if it were a four-letter word, and talk about it openly, people will understand that a loved one dying comes to all of us.

Dedicated to all my wonderful friends on **WidowNet**—  
and in memory of

Don McKinnis

"I could have missed the pain, but I would have  
had to miss The Dance." \*

*Special thanks goes out to Michael Goshorn, who, in his grief, created WidowNet so we would have a haven, a safe place to go, to vent, to ask for advice, sympathy or comfort. Thanks, Michael, from the bottom of my heart.*

\* (From *The Dance*, recorded by Garth Brooks, written by Tony Arata)

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Helping a widow isn't just for the first year – although as time goes on, she'll be able to take better care of things herself. But remember her on “special days” – send a “Thinking of you” card on the day that would have been their Wedding Anniversary, and other dates that you know mean something to her.

For instance, Labor Day weekend is hard for me, as that was the weekend Don had his second surgery – the surgery to fix the first one. New Year's Eve is hard, that was the evening when his Oncologist came into the room and told us it looked like the cancer was back. And our Wedding Anniversary is hard, too. The last one before Don died was our 30<sup>th</sup>. He was in the hospital at the University of Washington, and I was working in Wenatchee. Somehow, knowing that other people remember these dates makes it a bit easier.

If she has a computer, give her the WidowNet address given on the last page.

One thing that people did for me that was more help than I can say—almost every condolence card I received had money or a check in it. Don had been unable to work for 7 months; I didn't make much money, and bills were piling up. Sending money in this situation sounds crass, but probably will be very much appreciated.

I think the answer of what to say to a new widow (or widower) is: “Nothing.” No words will make it better or can change things back. As I said earlier, a smile, a hug, and “I'm so sorry” is all that needs to be said.

## FORWARD

*At one of the “small groups” meetings I attended for “40 Days of Purpose”, some of the women were talking about a mutual friend whose husband had died. They were wondering what to say to her. Since I have been a widow for 6 years, I felt that I could tell them that the best thing was a hug, and no words at all, but I had a very long list of things that were painful for a new widow to hear.*

*The only therapy I used when my husband, Don, died was an Internet Site called WidowNet. It's for Widows, and Widowers; if you go there with a problem, somebody will have had the same, or similar thing happen to them, and together, your fellow WN'ers will help you through it.*

*Since I couldn't remember all the things said to me that hurt, I went to WN to ask for painful comments. These are their responses.*

*This started out as a short talk, but under the urgings of my Pastor's wife, Anita Foster, I have made it into this little booklet. Anita said “It's important enough that it needs to reach a wider audience.” It's written from a woman's point of view, about helping widows, because that's the perspective I have. I hope it's helpful.— Sue*

8. *Don't harp on how strong we are. We're not trying to be role models. You may see us as strong, but chances are, we fall apart when you're not around.*
9. *Don't be put off by our moodiness. Some days we want to be social, other days, we don't.*
- 10 *Don't abandon us. We need you just as much a year later as we did a month later. And, when things are better, we will remember how you were there for us.*

*I'm quoting here: "drop by after work, and help with whatever... the trash, vacuum, dust, or whatever is needed....The most help were the people who had the brains enough to see what needed to be done and did it! Not call and ask "What do you need?", because I can't think, or don't want to seem needy or pushy, so I would always say "Nothing". My friend would come over, walk in, evaluate, and just jump on whatever was needed."*

*I asked some widowers if they would like to add anything. Not a very vocal bunch, but one wrote: "-- DON'T try to "fix a guy up" or pass his name along to single female friends. We can spot an ulterior motive a mile away, and don't need it."*

*(Sue's comment: I realize that I was different than most – I wanted to be "fixed up", but nobody would. Nobody ever has – I wonder if that is different for widows?)*

*Different guy in response to the above quote: "I haven't had anyone try to set me up. Perhaps someday. I did have people ask, though. When it's right for you to start dating again, you'll know. I don't have any better advice. It's different for each of us.*

*"My point early on was that I wasn't ready (to be "fixed up".) Now, I just want to be forewarned... if you're going to try to blindside me, it won't work (though I think he's a bit more on top of things than me; I tend to be a bit clueless!)*

*So for me, fix me up (if you can and/or dare!) but tell me in advance so I can back out early, if I'm not ready. I suspect similar things can be said for the women also."*

“Recruit friends to make meals and stock a freezer so dinner is always on hand. (Please remember to use foil pans for casseroles, and “no need to return” plastic ware for salads).

“Be a personal assistant. Offer to drive to make the arrangements. Prescriptions, dry cleaning, groceries, kids at ball practice. There’s always something that needs to be picked up. Reduce the pressure on the family by offering to run errands or chauffeur.

“Take care of the caregivers. Visit with a sick child, parent or spouse to give the caregiver a few hours off. Ask a hurting family if you can take the children on an outing to the movies, an amusement park, lunch. or even offer to take the kids for the night if you see she is stressed. If you know someone who’s very involved caring for another family, help her with dinner, or offer to baby sit.

“Keep the faith. Say you’ll pray for them, then do it! Alert the prayer chain, and contact your Pastor so he can put the name in the bulletin on Sunday. As we all know, Prayer works Wonders

“Stay in touch. Even when it seems like there’s nothing you can do, stay in touch. The worst thing is feeling so alone. Phone, send cards, e-mail, stop by. (call first). Let the person know that you’re there whenever she needs you.”

Another list – we’re big on lists, I think because we forget things so easily. (We call it “Widder Brain”)

1. *Don’t try to fix us. There is no magic pill.*
2. *Don’t tell us to snap out of it – we can’t. We know you are uncomfortable seeing us in pain, but we will recover at our own pace, not yours.*
3. *Don’t take it personally if we don’t return you phone calls. We are just trying to get through each day, intact. If you care about us, keep trying.*
4. *Don’t be afraid to talk about our loved ones. We find comfort in knowing that other people miss them, too. We want to hear your stories and special memories.*
5. *Don’t assume the role of stand-in parent for our children. It hurts to see someone trying to fill in. For us, there is no substitute.*
6. *Don’t tilt you head and look at us with puppy dog eyes. We don’t want pity.*
7. *Don’t ask about our financial situation. It’s none of your business.*

## PART I

### WHAT NOT TO SAY

I couldn’t remember all the things I heard that hurt (God has a way of making you forget those first painful months, which are TOO painful to remember). But I asked my friends on WidowNet (a web site for widows and widowers—web address at the end) for ones that had been said to them. By the way, we call these comments, and those who make them DGI’s, because they just Don’t Get It.

These are their responses. The direct quotes are in italics.

The basic platitudes – I call this the “God List”:

*God has a plan for you.*  
*God had a reason.*  
*God takes the righteous first.*  
*God needed another angel.*  
*God needed him more.*  
*God had it plan. It was meant to be.*  
*God wanted him more than you did.*  
*He’s in Heaven, you wouldn’t bring him back if you could.*  
*It’s God’s will.*  
*God works in mysterious ways.*  
*God still knows best.*  
*He’s in a better place.*

Now of course, most of these are true, God does have a plan, a reason, and still knows best. But I beg to differ if God wanted Don more than I did, and yes, I would have brought him back if I could have.

The one I heard the most, and was given to me most in my unofficial survey was *“God never gives you more than you can handle.”* The next one that said that to me was going to get such a HIT! But Mother Teresa came up with a better response: *“I only wish He didn’t have such a good opinion of me.”*

Many of the younger members wrote how painful it was when people asked them whether they planned to marry again. How would anyone know? One may meet another wonderful man, or not. But one can’t plan on it.

This is a direct quote *“Here’s another one: “It was a blessing.” A blessing? To whom? After getting so sick of hearing this I finally said, ‘Oh? How so? Is your life better now that Bill is dead? How have you been blessed?’”* I like the comeback

Some of them reported: *“You’re young and pretty, you’ll find someone else.”* Of course, this is probably true, but a widow of only a few months doesn’t want to hear that. One wrote, *“...that was said to me the day after my husband’s memorial service... coming when it did hurt me more than anything anyone said or did.”*

Another woman writes: *“The best so far is a comment on what would have been my 24<sup>th</sup> anniversary “Don’t dwell on the past – remember the good times.” Well, our wedding was a pretty good time, why wouldn’t I dwell on it?”*

*“You really need to find a father for those kids.”* The response most wished they could make... *“They HAVE a father, he just happens to have died, fathers are NOT replaceable!”*

of the house, and country line dancing is aerobic exercise, so I even lost weight.

Go visit – take a look around to see what small maintenance that needs to be done, then next time bring tools and do it, or, if you aren’t “handy-man” inclined, ask your husband to do it. And if he isn’t the handy man type, you probably know someone who is. Or hire it done for her.

Another woman sent a list:

1. *I wish more people would just leave me alone when I don’t feel like talking/socializing.*
2. *I wish more people would just show up to rake the yard, trim bushes, mow the lawn, when I feel zapped.*
3. *I wish someone would come and walk the dogs.*
4. *I wish someone would say: “If you need advice on car repairs, or want me to go to the mechanic with you, call me!”*
5. *I wish someone would say, “Hey, don’t bother to get dressed up. I’ll come over with a pizza and a bottle of wine and we can vegg out. I’ll pop in a movie, or we can just yak if you want to.”*
6. *I wish all my old friends/our friends would just treat me like a normal person in social settings.*
7. *I wish someone would call me for advice. I have many talents that they are aware of. I’d feel good if I could be useful to someone.*
8. *I wish they’d share stories about my husband with me, even pictures they have.*
9. *I wish they’d encourage me more in my endeavors without being protective or negative.*
10. *I wish some one would make me laugh!!!*

Recently I read a short article by Susan Sulich in Woman’s Day ®+ magazine about what helpful things you can do for a family in need – say a long illness, or bereavement. Some I’ve already mentioned, but all are worth repeating. (I’ve paraphrased a lot here.)

“Cook up some love. Deliver a meal that’s easy to reheat or freeze. For a long term difficulty, organize a “freezer pantry.”

After the service, after the people have gone, she is going to be lonely. Along with widowhood comes a “fog”. I don’t remember parts of that first month, or that summer for that matter. God does this, because if we were fully aware, the pain would be too much to stand. So we’re in the fog until the pain has lessened enough that we can stand it. We are not at our best mentally at this time.

“Call me if you need anything” doesn’t work. She won’t call. I didn’t call – I was too afraid of intruding, of messing up their day, whatever. Call her! Call just to see that she’s up and around. Many of us stay in bed, trying to deal with the grief. One of the physical effects is lethargy – it’s just too much trouble to move.

I lost most of our “couple” friends. There are two couples who have rallied ‘round, the others have sort of faded away. I always knew that Don was the “draw”, that I was the side-kick straight man. But still, it hurts. So do include her in things. Yes, she’ll feel like a fifth wheel. But it beats staying home alone, especially on Sunday afternoons.

Sunday afternoons – we have all agreed those are the hardest, their own special Hell. When I would come home from church, it was very difficult to know that I wouldn’t hear another live, human voice until Monday morning. Make plans with your friend for Sunday afternoon – it doesn’t matter what. Just have her come over and hang out with the family.

One widow suggests that someone needed to go to her house twice a month to be sure she paid her bills. Another was thankful that she had friends that made sure she actually ran the washer/dryer after she had put clothes in them. And remembered to take them out of the washer and into the dryer. She also writes: *“One friend called me every day for the first week after my sister had gone home, and told me what time she’d be having supper, and that she expected me to be there, no ifs, and, or buts. Got me out of the house and into life again.”*

I have a friend who insisted I take her country line dancing class. That was exactly the right thing for me. I met new people, I got out .

*“What happened?”* Meaning, what did he die of. The ones who really care already know.“

*“At least he went quick. It must have been painless,”* The response *“Yes, it was quick, but no, it wasn’t painless.”*

*“He went so fast and wasn’t sick, so I think he was just really tired.”* (from his Mother!)

*“You will be happier now that you’re single.”*

*“When you start dating again, you will have to remove the pictures of him.”* (Said about 30 minutes after the funeral.)

*“You will find someone better than him.”*

*“He was never happy with you, maybe now he is at peace.”* (said by the woman’s mother-in-law)

*“You weren’t married long.”* (Only 18 years, and would it hurt less if we’d been married a shorter length of time?)

*“It will be hard finding some one to marry you, with the kids and all.”*

*“You’ll be OK. Women lose their husbands every day, and they always work through it.”* (and your point is?)

*“Sometimes I feel so bad that I have (fill in her husband’s name) and you have no one.”*

*“You’re lucky you didn’t have any kids.”*

*“How can you make it without kids?”*

*“It isn’t as hard as I thought it would be, because I didn’t live with him.”* (from his mother)

*“I guess when you go home, it’s lonely cause no one is there.”* (Well, DUH)

Concerning his things: It’s really not a good idea to ask “What are you going to do with his stuff?” two days after the funeral. Or even two weeks. Don’t ask. She may not be ready to part with his things for several years. *“Can I have his truck, his shirt, his coffee cup, etc? Funny, no one wanted the funeral bill.”*

People that worry about YOUR money... *“How are you going to make ends meet?”* (One problem at a time, please.)

*“You are working too much, you need to rest, take care of yourself.”* (Sorry, folks some one has to pay the bills.)

*“You need to think about selling the house and moving to town.”* (WHY?)

*“Are you going to be OK with your finances?”* (How the He\*\* should I know 2 days after he died?)

*“Are you and the kids on food stamps, yet?”*

*“How can you live in the house where it happened? (As soon as the big truck of money pulls up, I will move.)*

Or, the opposite *“He had such a good job, he probably left you pretty well off, with the insurance and stuff, huh?”*

*“Well, he had a good, long life.”*

*“At least, he’s no longer in pain.”* (True. But I am. Or can’t you see that?)

*“Well, he suffered for a long time.”* (And that makes this any less painful?)

*Did you notice any symptoms?”*

*“Did he have heart problems?”* These last two rather lay a guilt trip on the widow when she already feels she should have detected something, and didn’t.

This one deserved her own paragraph:

*“THE WORST was leaving my husband’s funeral, as I was being led to the car, a man hurried up to me and asked “What do you plan to do now?” referring to my late husband’s business. Thankfully, the friend that was leading me put himself between me and that man and said “Now’s not the time.” I said “My plan at the moment is to remember to breathe.”*

This one happened to me – On a “thinking of you” card that my co-workers had all signed, one man wrote *“Don’t sweat the small stuff. PS it’s all small stuff.”* I blew it off at the time, but looking back now, that was an awful thing to say to a woman who’s husband was dying. Excuse me, but losing your spouse, your best friend, your soul mate, the other half of you is not “small stuff!”

Other remarks: *“I’m worried about you. I’m going to call every month or so, and check up on you.”* If you say this, MEAN it. And do it. *“You’ll get over it in a few months”. “You are not over it” said 22 and 30 days after the funeral. “Are things getting back to normal?”* (Normal is a setting on my washing machine, not my life)

## PART II

### HOW TO HELP

What SHOULD you say? What CAN you do? Well, there’s a country song with the line “You say it best, when you say nothing at all.” \* That, and a hug are good.

One woman writes *“Tell people to be sensitive and sincere in what they say to a newly widowed person, and if they can’t do that, then a smile and a hug are much more appropriate.” “He will be missed.” “I’m sorry for your loss.”*

How can you help between the death and the service?  
Some ideas:

First of all, let us talk about our spouse. Let us tell you of the details of the death, if we want to. Some of us do, some don’t. Let us tell you about the funny things that happened in the hospital. Don’t be uncomfortable when we want to talk about him. We HAVE to, it’s part of the grieving process.

Don’t be shocked if we break down. Tears don’t hurt anything; in fact, they make you feel better. Hold her in your arms. She needs to feel arms holding her, because she feels very much alone. I once cried “I don’t wanna be the grown-up any more!”

For practical help — a friend of mine offered the services of her cleaning lady – so I had her come the day before the memorial service. My sister, Nancy had to physically stop me from cleaning up for the cleaning lady. Having her come and clean took a load off my shoulders, as we had a house full of family before and after the service.

A woman writes: *“one of my friends made sure we had what we needed to wear to the funeral – hose, etc. She also took in the dry cleaning and picked it up. Several of my neighbors offered their homes to family/friends from out of town”* That would have helped in my case. I can’t remember where all those people slept!



To me, on a hot spring day shortly after Don died “How are you doing?” This was from a young strong (male) neighbor. I replied through tears, “How am I doing? I’m mowing my own damn lawn, that’s how I’m doing!” Looking back, If I hadn’t been so fierce, he would have probably offered to mow it for me. But it took me about 3 months before I realized what people meant when they said “How are you doing?”

From the “I can’t believe they said that” file: *“Bill had a spinal cord injury and used a motorized wheelchair. He never stopped loving life, was not paralyzed, remained productive and upbeat, never a “victim”. (Sounds like my Don, except for the wheelchair). Yet one doctor told him in front of me, ‘You should be thankful you’re dying of cancer. You’ll finally be rid of that wheelchair.’ The Doctor was fired on the spot.”*

There are people, even loved ones who have no concept of the time frame of grief. It takes as long as it takes. The death of a spouse changes you irrevocably, and forever. The pain lessens, but never goes away. I have that on good authority, from my Dad, who has been a widower for 36 years

Therefore, when we are told, after 6 weeks to *“pull up your socks and get on with it”*, it hurts. And when it comes from a family member, or a close friend that you had counted on for support, it hurts even more.

Near the 6th anniversary of Don getting sick in 1997, I remarked that those dates were hard for me. The response was *“I thought you would be over all that by now.”* Well guess what? You are NEVER “over it”. Sounds like you’re trying to climb a high hill—and that’s what it feels like, too. I repeat — it takes as long as it takes. And I was ahead of many who were grieving at the same time, because I did a lot of my grieving when it became evident that Don was losing his final battle.

I’ve saved the most irritating ones (in my opinion) for last.

*“You’re so strong, you can do this.”* (Well, yes, but what choice to I have?)

*“How do you do it?”* (Breathe in, breathe out. one baby step in front of the other.)

*“I’m (We’re) so proud of you.”* (For what? Carrying on? I have a choice?)

And the one that makes all widows and widowers go ballistic:

***“I know just how you feel. I just lost my (cat, dog, cousin – fill in the blank)” or “I know just how you feel, I’ve just been through a divorce.”***

Sorry, folks. Those don’t even come close to the anguish of losing a spouse. They make you sad for a few months, or maybe a few years. This is forever. The rest of your life kind of forever. A widow or widower may meet someone, fall in love and re-marry, but a part of her/him will always mourn the one that died.

Although I consider some of these comments just plain rude under any circumstance, if we who are grieving weren’t so emotionally fragile, if we were thinking rather than emoting, we would probably hear them, and shrug them off. But in the state we are in, especially in early grief, they cut to the bone.

But as it has been pointed out by two editors, at least the DGI’s who are mouthing them are *with* us. We know there are many “friends” who stay away because “I just don’t know what to say.” One widower reports former friends crossing to the other side of the street so they wouldn’t have to talk to him. As I explain in Part II, say nothing, just be there, and help. We’ll remember who was with us, and who didn’t show, and drifted away.

My sister said “We wanted to help, and didn’t know how.” She and her family DID know how, they just didn’t know they did. They made several trips to Eastern Washington, to help me sell/give away things, to take care of the house/yard, and once to help me move.

They were there for me, and let me come and visit them when ever I wanted. They supported me while I was doing dumb “wider brain” things, and were here for me and let me *live* with them, when I came to my senses and came “home” last year. To have a big, happy, normal (?) family to come and be with, and be a part of again was more help than she knows.

I think most of us widows and widowers recognize this, even through the “fog”, but we forget to say that just “being here” is help; more than anyone who isn’t a widow (er) will ever know.

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by  
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