

## WHAT TO EXPECT WHEN YOU ARE WIDOWED

Welcome to the club that no one wants to join - the membership fee is just too high. If you've picked up this booklet, or been given it, then you know that all the surgery and chemo or all of the medical treatments didn't work, and death is near for your spouse. If you are wondering what will come next, how you'll feel, and where to go for help, maybe I can answer some of the questions for you. I've been widowed, I know the stages you'll be going through (only don't ask me to name them), and I can tell you how I coped, and where I went for help. Please keep in mind that we all grieve differently, and on a different time schedule, and what works for one, doesn't work for another. Just keep trying until something works for you.

I mention WidowNet a lot in this information. It was the only grief therapy I had. After 6 years, I still go there: sometimes to get help, sometimes to offer help. It's a great place, and I would recommend it to everyone who is qualified to join this club that no one wants to be in. The site address is: **[www.widownet.org](http://www.widownet.org)**.

*Short pause here while I explain about WidowNet – or WN. It's a web site for Widows and Widowers. Any time of the day or night you can go there, and post a problem, a question, or a cry for help. Someone will probably be up and on the computer (one more thing to do when you can't sleep). Somebody will answer, even if it's just to say, "I understand, I'm sending you cyber hugs." WN was the only grief therapy I used. If I hadn't had time on my hands and Internet access at work, I don't think I would have made it.*

*On WN, we have our own terminology...GM is Grief Monster, DGI means a person who just Doesn't Get It – concerning your husband dying. It also means what they said. Widow brain, or "Widder Brain" is the fog of forgetfulness you're in – and is used to explain some dumb things we've all done because of it.*

My first advice for you is to get a copy of Bernie Siegel's "[Love, Medicine and Miracles](#)." It's not a long book, but he gives a lot of information about coping with potential fatal diseases; also ways to use mental imagery to picture the disease gone. Dr. Siegel has written other books, too. [Peace, Love and Healing](#), [Meditations for Enhancing Your Immune System](#), [Humor and Healing](#), [Getting Ready: Preparing for Surgery, Chemotherapy and Other Treatments](#), and [Prescriptions for Living](#). I wouldn't hesitate to recommend any one of them.

Dr. Siegel mentions it in his books, but I'd like to stress it again. [Humor and laughter are very important](#). Granted, you aren't finding life very humorous at this point, but I have found if you can find something in a situation to laugh at, or poke fun at, it makes it easier to cope. Well, that and chocolate.

If you haven't already done so, have wills written! If you don't have a will in the state of Washington, the state decides who gets what, and how much. While you're doing that, have a Reciprocal Durable Power of Attorney, and a Health Care Power of Attorney written. These last two give you the authority to make decisions for him, when he is incapable of making them himself. The last one pertains to medical treatment.

One of the first things I did after the diagnosis was to go to my Doctor and get a medication for stress, and/or a sleeping aid. No, you don't want to take either one of them for very long, but this is an unusual, stressful situation, and there's no sense going sleepless when there is help available.

Since I couldn't remember (Widow brain) what all we went through, I went to my ever-faithful friends at WidowNet. Some sent me answers, (anything that is in quotation marks, and is in *italics*, is a direct quote from a WN member) others told me that denial was a nice place to live for a while, and NO, they wouldn't have wanted to know. But, I feel that if I had known more what to expect, I wouldn't have been so devastated when it happened.

And it is devastating. After 9 years of "every-six-month check ups" (I grieved a little each time we went for a check-up) I had 6 weeks to prepare for the end, and it still was a shock. I can't imagine the shock to those of you whose husbands die suddenly.

One of the hardest things to do is to watch him slowly slide into someone other than the man you married. For my husband, Don, the first thing to go was his beautiful "radio announcer" voice, which was one of the things that attracted me to him. First, it was just hoarse, and then it faded to a whisper, and eventually was gone. Then he couldn't get out of his chair, then out of bed. He quit eating. Yours may slip into a coma or not, but will probably be unresponsive near the end. I tried playing Don's favorite Beethoven symphony for him – he motioned the music away. *I* believe that the "soul", the essence of who they are, goes on ahead, and doesn't want anything to do with earthly things.

Don died at home. His sister, Fran, the RN had come to stay with us and help, and his brother was there for the lifting part. (I had to go to work – one of us had to bring in some money) We had help from Hospice, and I can't say enough good things about those people. They were always there when we needed them, and did what they said they would do. If you haven't, you might want to think about calling Hospice.

If he's been sick for a long time, especially if you've been his main caregiver, don't be surprised if your first emotion is one of relief. Of course you didn't want him to die, and would have him back if you could, but there is also a relief that it's over, you can move on. You're probably very tired from being on duty 24/7. The feeling of relief is natural. The grief will come when you can handle it.

Plan the service ahead of time if you can. That way, you won't be making decisions while under the strain of his death. There will undoubtedly be some things that you'll wish you'd done differently. In the Grand Scheme of things, it won't matter. Go with what feels right for YOU at the time. If his family has other ideas – and they sometimes do, still go with what feels right for you, what you think he would want, and what you decided on when he made his "Living Will". And don't let the funeral home sell you more than you can afford!

Write the obituary. If you can't, ask a family member, or close friend to do it, with the information you supply. The newspaper may have a form or specific guidelines to follow; someone should pick this up ahead of time, if possible. Make a list of people to notify, complete with phone numbers. When the time comes, you won't want to try to look them up, it will be nice to have them all handy. Don't try to do this all by yourself. Other family members can make some of these calls for you.

Get many more certified copies of the Death Certificate than you think you'll ever need. Everybody wants one – your lawyer, the bank, the funeral home, Social Security, life insurance companies, pension funds. I can't remember who else, but there were more people who needed a copy than I thought possible. Some will want a certified one (with the seal showing) others will make do with a photocopy. Keep at least one of the certified type for yourself. You never know what may come up, and if you ever want to re-marry (I know, farthest thing from your mind, but still...) you'll need it.

**IMPORTANT – If you can, get somebody to drive you places.** You will be in a fog, and your brain won't be working the way it usually does. Your reaction time will be slow, or you won't be able to keep your foot on the gas. Your mind will wander off on its own, and not pay attention to driving. You become a traffic hazard. Sorry, but that's the way it is.

Immediately after he dies, you probably will be numb. You will be able to do what has to be done, make the phone calls, etc., and not feel particularly sad. If this happens, don't wonder "What's wrong with me, I can't even cry?" This is natural; it's God's way of not sending us more than we can stand at one time. I don't remember crying between Don's death and his memorial services, although I probably did.

There have been many discussions on WN on what to do with your wedding/engagement rings. That's a very personal decision. I can only tell you what I did. When Don died, I was still in my robe. I went in to get dressed, and took them off. I simply didn't feel married any more. Some women move them to their right hand, or have pendants made out of them, give them to children, or grandchildren, or have them reset. Do what feels right to you. And if anybody asks why you're still wearing them, or why you aren't - that's a DGI question. One good answer is "I'll be glad to answer if

you can tell me why you think it's your business." That might tick some people off. Maybe "I'll forgive you for asking if you'll forgive me for not answering," would be better.

One of the few things I do remember about that day is being cold right after he died. It was early March, and not even cold outside, but even though I put on a heavy sweater, and wrapped up in an afghan, I couldn't get warm. That was shock, and it passed.

After about two weeks, more or less, the initial numbness wears off, and the pain begins. Besides the pain, the crying so hard you can't see pain – there are other things that happen to your mind and body. Your short-term memory may be gone for a while. Your ability to make good decisions is severely impaired, which is why we are told not to make any major changes in your life for the first year.

A suggestion here: you'll get lots and lots of sympathy cards, but your mind won't take in you sent them to you, or if they wrote anything. In my case, a lot of them had checks in them. I tried to have my daughter take care of opening them, and keeping track of how much, but even at that, two checks fell through the cracks. A friend called me about one, wondering why I hadn't cashed it, and another one, made out to a favorite charity, I found when I went through the box 5 years later! Widder Brain at its worst!

Get a box – any will do, as long as it's big enough to hold them all. Put all the cards and letters in the box, LABEL IT, and put it away somewhere. Somewhere that you'll see now and then, so you don't forget it's there. Then, in a few months (or years) you can get them out and go over them again. It won't hurt as much then, and you'll be able to take in all the nice things people wrote about your husband.

Do the same thing with the memory/guest book from the service. It will be too much to take in at first, but in a few months (or years) you'll be able to, and I was glad to know who was there. Although there's one signature I have yet to figure out.

I have described widow-hood as similar to suddenly being on stage, in front of a live audience, in a play you didn't audition for, don't want to be in, don't know the lines of, nor who the other actors are. That was the way I felt most of the time. I couldn't remember what expression I had on my face and couldn't figure out how to change it.

It's going to hurt. It's going to hurt like hell. It's hardest thing you'll ever have to do. But this first stage of grief is as bad as it gets. There is NO worse time than this. There were times when it hurt so bad I couldn't breathe. Some widows have described it as feeling though your heart was ripped out without benefit of anesthetic. The pain is real, and physical. But it won't kill you. You will live through this. While you are living through it, crying and yelling and screaming and ranting and raving (in the privacy of your own home) are permitted. For that matter, crying is permitted anywhere – you won't

be able to stop the tears from coming. A WN friend: *“I learned that when the ‘feelings’ hit you, don’t try to push them away because they feel uncomfortable, just sit with them for a moment and acknowledge them until they pass. I found that by doing this, I was able to move through them more quickly and even a bit less traumatically.”*

Another from WidowNet wrote, *“None of the examples anyone could give would touch on the real deal. When I say my heart ached, it sounds rather romantic and cliché’, when, in fact it actually hurt, and ached for real. When I say I had widow brain, or fog brain, it sounds like I might have been forgetful, when, in fact, little sunk in, months passed by with barely a notice of anything but pain, and who could understand reaching for a thought that just isn’t there. How can mere words recreate the extreme physiological misery, emotional devastation, financial blow and life altering changes that actually take place? They can’t. You just have to live it and hope you survive. Maybe it’s best no one ever knows until it happens.”*

Thankfully, as time goes on, the memory of all of the emotional, mental, and physiological things that happened in your body will fade a little. The pain will still be there, but it won’t be the double over, take your breath away sort of pain that you experience at first.

People will want to help you. Let them. It will make them feel better, and it will lighten your load. If you insist on keeping that “stiff upper lip”, you short-change your family and friends along with yourself. Keep a list of things that need to be attended to, so you’ll be able to remember. That way when they ask, “What can I do?” you’ll be able to tell them. From WN: *“I found what helped me in that first year was letting go of some of the control. By that I mean, when people offered to help, instead of saying, “No, that’s OK, I can take care of (fill in the blank).” I said, “Thank you; I’d appreciate that” instead. In other words, I took them at their word (they wanted to help) and learned that I didn’t have to do everything myself. That was a tough one for me, as I’m pretty independent and don’t like to appear helpless, but it was a very positive thing as well.”*

Your beliefs about yourself will be compromised. You probably lost part of your identity when your husband died. I found myself thinking, “How did I get here? What *happened*? Could I have done anything differently?” Of course, the answer to that question is “No”. “Where do I go from here? How do I *do* this?” Sorry, no answers for those questions. There’s no way around it. Like childbirth, the only way *out* of grieving is *through*. You can numb it for a while with drugs, but you can’t stay drugged forever.

Be prepared for panic/anxiety attacks. Be prepared for a reluctance to leave the house. Be extra careful driving – a song on the radio can trigger tears, which makes seeing difficult. You might have a problem concentrating. [I was working as a bookkeeper, and it was all I could do to keep my mind

focused enough to keep the books in balance.] You might have all of these, or none, or some. But they all pass, eventually.

Don't be surprised if you get very angry with your husband. The summer after Don died, I was trying to keep up the yard, the house and work full time. One hot day, I had been out pulling weeds in the flowerbeds until the job was completed. I came in the house, where it was cool, intending to take a bath and have dinner. Then I remembered that it was Garbage Night (the garbage truck came very early in the morning, and we were encouraged to put our cans out the night before). Garbage had always been Don's job. I went back out, and dragged the cans to the end of the very long driveway. No big deal, really, they had wheels. But all of a sudden, I was raging mad at him, for going off and leaving me to deal with everything all on my own, especially the Garbage! I was so angry, there should have been steam coming out my ears. The anger is natural, but six years later, I still get angry when I have to empty my own garbage.

A part of your mind will refuse to accept the fact that he is gone. It will play tricks on you; make you think you hear his car in the driveway, his footsteps. That's normal, too. For me, a hard part of the day is still from 5 PM, when he used to get home, until about 7. I still listen for the car in the driveway, or a garage door going up, signaling the fact that he was home.

There is another odd thing that some widows (and widowers) experience – we call it Music Obsession, where we play the same CD, or tape, or if you're old enough, LP, over and over and over and... well, you get the picture. Usually the CD picked has songs on it that mean something to us. (Every time some new odd thing comes up, someone will bring it up on WidowNet, and what do you know? Most have been having the same thing, and thought they were the only one!)

I've always been a little clumsy, but the first summer I was widowed, I took it to a new level. I broke an entire set of glass tumblers, one at a time, and was black and blue from running into things. I was moving into a split entry apartment, and forgot I was on stairs, and fell. I had to learn to think about where I was putting my feet. I'm telling you this so you won't be surprised if it happens to you.

You'll probably be depressed – and who has a better reason? However, if it gets to be more than you can handle, ask for help. There are drugs now to help with the depression that comes with grief, and Doctors are usually good about prescribing them. Only you will know when the depression is more than you can handle on your own.

For some reason, along with depression comes insomnia. I simply could not shut my mind off at night and fall asleep. Without resorting to drugs, there are many things you can try:

1. Don't lie there awake (and crying?) for more than ½ hour. For one thing, if you're crying you won't be able to breathe. For another, your brain will come to associate the bed with

bad things, and won't let you sleep! Get up, have a warm drink of something without caffeine, watch TV, or read. Unless you choose to read, keep the lights dim, so your brain won't think "Morning! Time to get up!"

2. Learn and use the relaxation technique – breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth (yes, like while you were in labor). On the out breath, concentrate on making your toes relax. Then move on to your feet, ankles, and so on up the body.
3. While you're in bed, close your eyes, and imagine a big black circle, that fills everything you can see. Now, let no other thought intrude, just concentrate on keeping that circle black and round. That one works for me.

You might get physically ill, too. The stress of losing a spouse is enough to make the strongest immune systems fail. For me, it was just a cold, but a lot of widows and widowers get serious ailments. Oh! I didn't get sick at the time, but 5 years later I was diagnosed with Fibromyalgia, which can be triggered by a traumatic event. I wonder if it's connected. In trying to help you, I'm helping myself, too. I wonder if we HAVE to do all the different parts of grief, no passing "go" and no "collecting \$200.00?" And, if we don't do them early in grief, we have to do them eventually. Anyway try to de-stress, take your vitamins, take extra care, and be sure to eat right.

Oh, yes, eating. You probably won't feel like cooking. But you HAVE to eat. From what's reported on WidowNet, some of us end up eating what ever is handiest – peanut butter, cheese, finger foods, potato chips, popcorn, fast food. Many ate some pretty weird combinations, pointing out that it did sustain life. If you just can't muster up the will to cook for one (and it's hard, I know), the newest frozen dinners are really good. If weight isn't an issue, you can have any one of the ones with all sorts of goodies. If you're watching calorie intake, you options are a bit more limited, but it has been my experience that most of the meals taste just fine. But expensive. Let's see...Kraft Mac and Cheese? Top Ramen?

I remember that first summer people on WN complaining because going to the grocery store was just too much trouble, the same with doing housework (the old lethargy thing). So they wouldn't go to the grocery store, or do the dishes until they found themselves eating cornflakes without milk out of the bundt pan with an ice cream scoop. Try not to let it go that far.

Forgetfulness happens to all of us. One woman was thankful that she had friends that stopped by to be sure she put the clothes in the washer and/or dryer. And once they were there, remembered to turn the machine *on*. Another was glad somebody came by and reminded her to pay her bills. I remember going into a room to get something, and by the time I got there, I had forgotten what I wanted, or why I was in that room.

I mentioned lethargy. It could be an effort to just get out of bed, let alone clean, cook, or do laundry. I didn't have this at the time, but am experiencing it now – 6 years later. For this, my advice to you (and me) is to push on, get up and out of bed. If that's as far as it goes for one day, so be it. But the next day, try to do a little more. (I, however, am supposed to be "over it", so I have to get up and go to work.) From a WN friend: *"Live each day, one day at a time, one step at a time, one breath at a time. Little or no alcohol – exercise and a regular routine, which might mean just getting out of bed, breakfast, walk, and back to bed, increasing activity slowly."*

*"My one rule for grieving has always been: If it makes me feel better, and it's not harming anyone or myself, then I do it, no matter what it is, and what others think of it."*

*"I also agree with crying every time you feel like it, no matter where you are, no matter who you are with. Don't try to protect other people from your sadness. Don't hold back tears. Crying hurts while you're doing it, but afterward, you get a few precious moments of clarity and relief."* (And I get a sense of euphoria.)

From one on WN who's been there and been a widow a long time – even longer than I have: *"Please keep in mind that we had 14 months to prepare for Chuck's death; I think that makes a difference in the grieving process. We did a great deal of grieving together. There was never any hope from the day of diagnoses."*

- 1. It is ok to cry, just don't let it consume you. Every time I broke down in public, except around close friends, I was mad at myself.*
- 2. Get up every morning, whether you feel like it or not. Wallowing will get you in trouble eventually. (We all do a little, but large doses of wallowing can lead to addiction.)*
- 3. Let your friends be your friends. Even when they think you should "get on with it!" they'll listen if they are true Blue.*
- 4. Don't put off the legalities. Get things started as soon as you can. They won't go away, and sometimes there are time limitations. You have to eat, pay the mortgage, etc., so take care of you.*
- 5. I repeat, **take care of you.***

*"I know I survived by going back to teach in 2 ½ weeks and never missed a day thereafter. My students and the staff were my main support. I have survived. Chuck would have found a way to kick me in the behind if I hadn't made it!"*

One of my WN friends mentioned the financial blow. I hope your husband has life insurance, and enough so you can keep your standard of living, but know that's not always the case. (Don didn't, but that's another story). Many widows who have been stay-at-home moms or wives have been forced to



return to work, many times at low wage. I don't know what the answer is at this point, except to pray that you've been trained for something, and can be self-supporting.

Speaking of that, you *must* apply for the Social Security Death benefit (a whopping \$255.00). If you're on Social Security already, there's no problem. But you must apply no matter what age you are. That way, when you turn 60, and if you are single, you can collect on his Social Security. Other than that, if money is tight, I don't know what to tell you. Don was the main breadwinner, but hadn't worked for 7 months. I had to declare bankruptcy.

Out of necessity, I returned to my job, a week after the death. I think it was good for me; I had to really concentrate to do my job, which sent the grief thoughts to the back of my mind. Some of the widows, and widowers I talked to had a very hard time returning to work, especially those who had supervisors without understanding hearts. I was fortunate that I had worked for the same small company for 20 years, and we were like family. They understood when I would sit there and cry. Many times one or the other of my co-workers would cry with me.

Sunday afternoons are their own special hell; even more so if you and your spouse had things that you did together at that time. If you are living alone now, you probably will find that you won't hear a live human voice from the time you leave your religious service until you go to work Monday morning. I hated that. We all hate that. Try to plan something for then so you won't be alone.

One thing that surprised me was the comments from supposedly well-meaning friends. On WidowNet, we call these comments, and those who make them, DGI's, because the people just Don't Get It. I collected as many as I could, and they are in my previous "book," "*When a Friend's Spouse Dies.*" People don't mean these comments to hurt; they simply are trying to express an emotion that can't be put into words. However, a lot of them *will* hurt. Try not to let it get to you. Try to believe that they mean well. And, they are *there*, with you, not hiding away because they "don't know what to say." If thinking about all those things doesn't help, try picturing the DGI's naked.

Be prepared for most of your "couple" friends to disappear. None of us on WidowNet are quite sure why. The theory has been offered that the women are afraid you'll try to "steal" their husbands. Like you'll feel like entering into a new relationship right away. Many won't know what to say to you, or know they can treat you just like they always did. And besides, now you're a single woman, and it makes seating at dinner "terribly difficult." One widower reported that people would cross to the other side of the street, so as not to have to talk to him. People simply don't know what to say, so rather than blurt out a DGI comment, they ignore us.

Grief comes in waves. You can be going along, minding your own business, and a wave of grief will suddenly hit. Stop what you are doing, and pay attention to it. If it's a strong one, express it. Cry, stomp your feet, beat on pillows. On WidowNet, we called it riding the Grief roller coaster. A really

bad time was “being attacked by the Grief Monster,” or GM for short. Putting a name to it, I was able to find a picture in my clip art of a particularly dumb looking dragon. I labeled him the Grief Monster. For me, if I could make fun of it, laugh at it, the grief was easier to take. In case you hadn’t noticed, it still works for me.

How else do we cope with the grief? My story – I called a friend, or she called me, I forget just which way it went. When she asked me how I was doing, I burst into tears. She said, “OK, here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to come over and hang with me while I do my radio show. You’ve never seen one of the new computerized control rooms, have you? Then you’re going to come to my country line dancing class on Thursday, and you’re going to join the Wenatchee Singles Club.”

It was exactly what I needed. And, as an added bonus, country line dancing is aerobic, and I lost 30 pounds! But what works for one person won’t necessarily work for another, so I went back to WidowNet and asked what worked for them. Their answers, direct quotes, are in italics:

About that theoretical “first year” – it just isn’t so. A WN friend writes: *“Most importantly, I wish someone had told me that there is nothing magical about surviving the first year. The numbness wears off but you then have to deal with the reality of your situation. And since most people think you are “over it” at one year, it’s harder to find people who will listen...”* We all grieve at different speeds, and different paces. It takes as long as it takes; there is no exact time when you can say you’re “over it”. To tell the truth, you are never over it, it just gets more bearable.

As long as we’re talking about time, many of us have found that the second anniversary of the death, and the second year are much more difficult than the first. Partly because people expect us to be “over it,” I think. In my case, it was partly because *I* expected me to be “over” it.

I wrote this in the summer of 1998, after Don had died in March of that year:

*I always wanted to be first in my group to do something. But – being a widow wasn’t what I had in mind!*

- 1. Let’s tell it like it really is. He died. He didn’t “pass away”, or “pass”. I didn’t lose him. He died.*
- 2. Don’t decide for me how long it will take to get over him. It will take as long as it takes. But, I may grieve faster than some, too, so don’t be shocked if you see me “out” with someone else. Trust me. We talked about this. This is what he wanted.*
- 3. Don’t ask, “Is there anything I can do?” There is. But what I’m too shy to say is, “Yes. Invite me to your party, picnic, BBQ. Especially if it’s on Sunday Afternoon.” (Sunday afternoons suck when you’re alone) “Treat me like you did when he was alive. I’m still me.”*
- 4. “God never sends you more than you can handle.” Right. Wish he didn’t have such a good opinion of me.*

5. *“God never closes a door, but he opens a window.” So I can escape?*

By now, I don't know if I intended to add on to it (probably add more to the DGI “God” comments), or what. But that is what I was feeling that first awful summer.

Read on:

*One of my WN friends said “little or no alcohol” another wrote “what got me through the early months was drinking!!! Stupid, right, but it kept me numb and maybe that’s what I needed. Of course, it didn’t work for too long. So 13 months after Linda died, I went to a therapist. And that’s what has kept me going to this day. Other than, of course, WN and special Internet friends that I met because of WN. If I didn’t have computer access from work, and was not able to get to WN... I would not be here today.”*

*“One grief book I read said don’t go to bed a night without some kind of minimal plan for the next day, even if it’s going for a walk, buying groceries, or whatever. Those large blank expanses of time are excruciating.” This sounds like an excellent plan to me. I shall use it, even after 6 years, because I’m alone again.*

*“Reach out to people. Don’t sit at home and complain that everyone has forgotten you and nobody cares. People do care; they just don’t know what you need. Call them. Plan to have lunch or dinner or just hang around together. I made two lists of people I could call upon, an A list and a B list. If someone wasn’t available when I needed company, I called someone else, sometimes having to call three or four people until I located someone who was available.” Well, whatever works. But I never could have done that – I’m an extrovert, but I just couldn’t have.*

*“My suggestion is to find an outlet for the love you have in your heart. If you don't, you'll explode! Love is a good thing, and should be shared. It is meant to be shared.” A good way to do this would be to volunteer at something. A lot of hospitals like to have volunteers to come in and rock the sick babies. Almost every organization can use volunteers – Food Bank, Soup Kitchens – are you up for a Teen Center? Probably not. But there are a whole lot of places where sharing your love would make a difference.*

*“A few of things that helped me were:*

*1 - not looking too far ahead. I was overwhelmed and scared by so many things right after Art died. I allowed myself some mornings to only look a few hours ahead.*

*2 - I wouldn't commit to plans other than lawyer and banker appointments. If people pressed me for answers if I'd be somewhere or not, I'd say no. For a long time I wasn't sure how I'd react to things emotionally, so, I wouldn't commit to things.*

*3 - If something doesn't feel right, then it isn't right. People will tell you that "you have to do this*

*and that." You don't HAVE to do anything that doesn't feel right to you. Listen to the ideas and take and use the ones that feel right to you"*

*"...I, too, kept a journal of sorts. I bought a blank book (black of course) and named it my "Grief Book". Inside are poems, thoughts, letters to my husband, and drawings of grief for those times I had no words.*

*"A few years ago, I took all the cards, etc. that came from people, and put them into a scrapbook. What I have now are the two sides of death. The side that most people see, and know about (the funeral stuff and well wishes) and the horrid side (Grief Book) that is the reality of it all."*

I took the hand-written journal I had, typed it into the computer, and saved it to a disk. I felt compelled to do this, and re-live it one last time. After I did this, I felt much better. As time has gone on, I've added to it, a prequel, if you will. I told about how we met, our wedding, all the years of our life – well, I am doing it. It's an on-going project. I started writing these booklets; writing has been a bigger help than I thought it could be.

Of course my faith, and my church families (I had two) helped a lot. Without that, I would not have made it. I believe that God doesn't care what form your prayer takes, and that he knows what you need without it having to be put into words. However, putting it into words can't hurt. A lot of the times, my prayer was "Dear God – HELP!" which I've been told is a perfectly legitimate prayer.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians (4:6-13) he writes: "Everyone has challenges. Pray about everything! God promises peace. I can do everything through Him, who gives me peace." I have no idea what translation that's from, but at this point in our lives, we need the peace as much as anything.

I also have music. I have a sampler on the wall above my piano that states, "God gave us music so that we might pray without words." I think that says it all. I did notice a strange thing, though. I sing – not well, but I do it, and enjoy it. When Don was sick the first time in '89, and going through an experimental chemo treatment, I was so scared, I couldn't sing. I couldn't even sing along with the radio in the car without crying. It wasn't until he had been home about 3 weeks, and in partial remission, that I could sing. The song I sang along with for the first time after he came home was "Take My Hand, Precious Lord".

*When Don was sick for the final time, I think that deep inside, I must have known, and I found I needed to sing, and have music around me. Of course, after he died, it took me a few weeks to be able to sing again, but that came back rather quickly, and again, I found solace in music.*

*And now for the really bad news. Losing a spouse changes your life irrevocably, and forever. The pain gets easier, but there will be a little sadness in a small corner of your mind (or heart) for the rest of your life.*

I got this poem from WidowNet one day:

“In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,  
We remember them.  
In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring,  
We remember them.  
In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer,  
We remember them.  
In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn,  
We remember them.  
In the beginning of the year and when it ends,  
We remember them.  
When we are weary and in need of strength,  
We remember them.  
When we are lost and sick at heart,  
We remember them.  
When we have joys we yearn to share,  
We remember them.  
So long as we live, they too will live  
For they are a part of all who have known them.  
We remember them.”

I’m sorry, I don’t know who wrote it. Will we forget him? No, never. But we learn to live with that pain, and get up, face the day, go to work – whatever anyway. In short, we get on with life.

I read a great quote the other day by Patti O’Donnell, “Life may not be the party we hoped for, but while we are here, we might as well dance.”

I know, you don’t feel much like dancing right now – or doing much of anything else, for that matter, but like that stage I felt suddenly thrust upon, you say your lines to the best of your ability, at that moment. What you say and do now isn’t what you would have said and done before he died, but it’s the best you can do at this point. You’ve lost your innocence, and will never get it back, or be the same.

Here’s a good quote from Elizabeth Kubler Ross’s Five Stages of Grief “The last stage is acceptance, not resignation, but rather the release of the defiant hold we have on life as we think it ought to be.”

Think on that – life is never what we think it ought to be, and even more so now. But if you accept that fact, and the fact that he is really, truly gone, that all the ranting, raving, sobbing, punching pillows, and crying enough tears to fill an ocean won’t bring him back, then I think that you have taken a big step in climbing the Mountain we call Grief.

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*This was something I felt compelled to write. I hope it helps - ----- Sue, July 2004*

# A Widower's Corollary to "What to Expect when you are Widowed"

Much of what Sue said in her article for Widows applies to us Widowers as well. However, there are a few points I'd like to make, since some of our concerns are different.

None of us wants to be here. As Sue put it, "The membership fee is just too high." You'll find if you don't already know, that that is truer now than anytime.

I didn't write in a journal. I don't think I could have written at all, to be honest. And, unlike Sue, I have little kids at home, also. That introduces problems that Sue didn't put in her work, but which are important for those of us men raising children on our own. To add to the dissimilarities between Sue and me, my wife died very suddenly in my arms, without any real forewarning.

One big thing I'd like to emphasize even more than Sue did: Get a Will and Power of Attorney written! I can't emphasize this enough. You may also want to set up a Living Trust, especially if you have young kids like I do. It helps me relax knowing that I've planned for the worst that I can conceive of for them—losing me, too.

You'll have lots of people wanting to help you out. Let them. My neighbor edged (and sometimes mowed) my lawn for almost a year. I didn't have the strength, or the time, and he saw it as something he could do for me. Others will do similar things.

A fellow widower wrote: *"Much of what applies to widows applies to widowers as well, especially the "you'll get over it" or "you'll find someone else" stuff. But there are some differences.*  
*-- In my case, I was a long-term caregiver and could only leave my wife for very brief periods. Some of my neighbors provided me a welcome break during those periods by encouraging me to drop by unannounced for a chat or a drink. They continued that practice after my wife died and I really appreciated it.*  
*-- If a widower has young children, include them in activities with your children but be tolerant- his kids are coping with grief too.*  
*--Invitations to dinner, etc. are generally appreciated by a widower, but be understanding if he says "no, thanks". He has his own stuff to deal with."*

Daycare will be a nightmare. There is no other way of putting it. Do your best, and don't stress too much. This is another place where good friends will help a lot. Let them help you when you need it. You can't do it all by yourself. In fact, that's a good mantra to repeat every day: "I can't do it all myself, I can't do it all myself." At the same time, remember, you CAN do this. It's not impossible.

My wife died very suddenly - collapsed in my arms. I will never forget that day, which I am told was actually 3 days (time lost all meaning). Some of you will have been away from your wives. Know that she loves you, and knows you love her. Yes, that's present tense; love never dies.

Many men don't wear their wedding bands. I always did, and still wear it on my right hand. For a long time, I also wore her band on my littlest finger. Do what is right for YOU. There are no rules. Some men on WidowNet have commented that, without their wedding band on, they feel like people are staring at them when they're out with the kids. "Weekend Dad Syndrome," one called it. I saw and felt it also. I don't have a solution,

but having the wedding band on my right hand seems to make ME more comfortable, and many say similar things.

When I was newly widowed, about 3 weeks in, a woman (who I have known my entire life) came up to me after Church and said, "You should remarry quickly, for the sake of your children." I don't completely recall what I said to her, but I spoke with her son (one of my best friends) and asked him to tell her how much it hurt me. These DGI's will say things that seem to make sense to them but which, in reality, just hurt. I don't have any real answers except to say that we need to suffer through them. One WN man suggested telling them to "F\_\_\_ Off," but I'm not that kind of guy. Others suggest a Widower's Glare. Do what works for you.

Another issue I have is what I term "Puppy Dog Eyes." Others call it the "Pity Look." It's that look from people who feel sorry for you, just because you're a Widower. It's especially bad when paired with "You look so good" or "your kids are doing so well" or some such nonsense. Like I should be broken down all the time or something! I sometimes feel that Widows don't get the same pity, since they're 'expected' to be able to raise kids alone (talk about your double standard!). For me, that's always been a problem. I don't do well with pity, and certainly not now. To be honest, changing the subject seems to be about the only solution to those folks, since they just don't understand that we're doing what we have to do.

Many will ask how you're doing and/or how you're doing it (especially with kids). If they really care (and that's a minority, unfortunately), I always respond, "The sun rises, the sun sets. In between, I do what has to be done." It's honest, not incredibly rude, and few ever questioned me again.

Paperwork is a bitch. No other way to put that, either. There are a multitude of forms for absolutely everything. I wish I could say that it would be easier, but it won't be. My wife handled most of the filing; I'm a messy person to start with, and this doesn't make it any easier. That said, keep up with the bills, at least enough to keep the lights and heat on. I've found that automatic payment is fabulous. Mortgage, insurance, power, phone, all paid without me dealing with it. Most of the other bills (sewer, garbage) I'll transfer over to autopay when it's available. With all that you've got to do, fewer things to remember is always better. Direct deposit your paycheck also, to further automate the process.

When you have to deal with a company that needs you to do something, I have found a magic word: "Is there any way you can take care of this without me?" I'm not sure why, but all of a sudden they tend not to need me to fill out all of their silly little forms or make the phone calls for them. I've never been disappointed. At the very least, the companies have filled out the forms, marked where I'm to sign, and sent them with return postage. This works for many different types of companies. It's the only time I use the pathetic/pity to my advantage (and not often, at that).

Cry when you need to. You won't have much choice anyway, but if you try to hold it in it only gets worse. Easier said than done, I know; I'm one of those stoic types. But it's important. If you have kids, you'll likely cry around them also, and it may make them want to cry. That's OK, too. If you don't let it out when it needs to come, you'll make yourself physically sick later on. You likely already know that already, but it's important to say anyway.

Men may feel uncomfortable if you're around their wives. Your need for an "estrogen fix" (non-physical—just the sound of a woman's voice is often enough) can be misconstrued by some insecure men around you. Doing "guy" things with the husbands is not just therapeutic, but also can be a way of solving that contact, since (with him around) he won't be "jealous" of your time with his wife. Similar things with coworkers; you need to watch your professional and personal distance, since the scent of the female is something you'll miss, especially at first (it, too, comes in waves).

That brings us to Skin Hunger. Yes, that's what I mean. I don't have any real solution; just work through it, like the tears. But be careful. You don't want to hurt yourself any more than you've already been hurt.

Pain. Some feel more, some less. Some men report that they take stupid chances, since their reason for living is gone. Others are exactly the opposite: they take no chances at all. Neither is healthy. Remember that you have a commitment to you to take care of yourself. And if you have kids at home, you have the commitment to them as well. I won't pretend that it's easy, but it is important.

For me, cooking is one of the worst things (summer vacations off with the kids is close second—how do I fill all that time?). I've never been a very good cook. Do your best. Don't worry about eating the same leftovers for 5 meals in a row (though spicy lasagna isn't as good for breakfast as you might think). I only recently started venturing out from my 6-8 mainstay dishes and made something my wife used to make. My oldest (it was one of her favorites) liked it. Ate three portions (she rarely finishes one). You can do this, too.

Remember that you're strong, that you can do this. If you had time to plan for her death, you will know this differently from those of us for whom it was sudden. Don't be afraid to show your emotions; I still wear a lot of black. Many of us do. I know one widow (remarried last summer after over 6 years alone) who wore black almost daily until she became engaged. That's normal, too.

*"By the way... there is really no 'getting over it' we just learn to abide...."*

I hope some of this is helpful to you. May it bring some measure of peace. –

David B, July 2004