

CHALLENGE

*A mini-textbook to help you through
the emotions, surprises and devastation
that follow the death of your wife or husband.*

By Harris E. Adriance

**In Memory of Sue
1918-1986**

*With special appreciation to Gary DeLong whose sensitivity, understanding, friendship,
and humor kept us on our feet through the very worst and ultimately to better times.*

*With deep appreciation to family, friends, and fellow sufferers who played their special
roles throughout this experience and thus contributed to this booklet.*

PREFACE

If you have recently lost your husband or wife, you have plunged into what is surely the most miserable experience of your lifetime. Whatever crises you have confronted over the years cannot approach the feelings of devastation and utter aloneness that smother you now.

Even if you knew for some time that your loss was coming, you will find that you are generally unprepared for the intensity of grief or for the assortment of thoughts, sensations, and aspects of human nature that you must deal with.

Soon after Sue died, I was desperate to understand what was happening and what to do to help myself. I found virtually nothing in print that offered the direct nuts-and-bolts kind of assistance I needed. I had to learn as I went along, like walking through a minefield. Now, a year later, I see an opportunity to help you by reporting briefly what I learned. In talking about it with many others who have passed this way before me, I found that nearly everyone sooner or later shared the same experiences. As you read this, be assured that you are not alone in your suffering and that there are many who truly understand. I know, for I have been there.

THE CHALLENGE

Obviously, in this small booklet, I am going to simplify an experience that is both complex and devastating. Having survived the first year of my own loss, I am convinced that discussing just the basics of this difficult time is what is needed here. So this is an attempt to bring a little order out of a lot of chaos, when rational thinking is hard to come by, and when alarms and concerns can be dealt with more effectively if they are anticipated and understood as they occur.

Accordingly, there are just two major subject categories addressed here. The first is headed DON'T BE ALARMED IF... and deals with things I wish I had known early on. The second is headed TRICKS OF THE TRADE and offers a few ways to help you cope, ways which have been helpful to others.

Don't be alarmed if...

1. Don't be alarmed if, occasionally, thoughts of suicide come to mind. In the moments of terrible despair, they say it is only the possibility of committing suicide that keeps grief-stricken people from going mad. This is normal. Gradually, this extreme option will fade away. A less extreme version of suicidal thoughts is the realization that you don't care whether you live or die. In due course, this state of mind will become more positive as you recognize and cultivate more reasons for living than not living.
2. Don't be alarmed if friends or relatives on whom you may have counted most for support turn out to be a total loss. No call, no invitation, just silence. You will feel shocked, hurt, angry. Quite possibly, months later, you will learn that there is a valid reason why they simply couldn't handle the loss themselves. But some doors just shut without any visible reason. Fortunately, there is a counterbalance to this very disturbing situation. New friends appear and you find a special warmth and understanding in people you scarcely knew before, or from whom you least expected such a rewarding association.
3. Don't be alarmed if there are moments when grief hits you harder than you imagined possible. I was told many times that "the greater your love, the greater the price you must pay." It is absolutely true. You can only be grateful that you had a love so special that the extreme anguish you feel is justified. Not everyone has been so fortunate!
4. Don't be alarmed if the extreme emotional stress of this period in your life triggers physical and mental reactions in a variety of ways. Here are a few common examples:
 - a. You feel torn apart and out of balance; half the time physically numb and the other half frantically busy.
 - b. Your sleep cycle is off its track; some nights spent in reasonable sleep but others spent mostly wide, staring awake. Nighttime fears and worries are typically exaggerated.
 - c. You can't get out of bed in the morning; it takes great physical effort just to put your feet on the floor.
 - d. You seem to lose strength as grief takes on an actual weight and you realize the true meaning of the expression "having a heavy heart." The weight of grief feels like a giant fist shoving you to the ground.
 - e. Your digestive process, your insides in general, get out of harmony and cause you assorted forms of distress. (With the cooperation of your physician, do not be too proud or too disciplined to find a measure of needed relief available to you through occasional use of appropriate medication. That's what it's there for.)

5. Don't be alarmed if you fall prey to feelings of anger, regret, or outright fear. At this time you are highly vulnerable to miserable manipulation by your emotions. You need to be your own best friend, not your own worst enemy. So try to realize that, in due course, more rational thinking will prevail and you will come to terms with these negative inner thoughts.
6. Don't be alarmed if, just as you feel you are getting on top of things, you feel worse than ever. When I was told by a well-meaning acquaintance that this would happen, I angrily rejected it. But it is certainly true. I confess to having kept so much on the run that I did not truly confront nor fully accept my loss. I was fiercely protecting myself, keeping a stiff upper lip. Time is required for such a loss to sink in, for the mind to open to acceptance. As one experienced person told me, "You must go through the eye of the storm." Only when you have done this (and somehow you will know it), will you truly be on the road to recovery.

Tricks of the Trade

In self-defense you will invent your own strategies and devices to get yourself through each day. Some of these you will not feel enthusiastic about doing, but you must force yourself. This is not a time in which self-discipline is either welcome or comes easily. But, in most instances, when you have made the effort to do these things, you will be glad, and you will feel better for it. Each step you take, day by day, will contribute to your recovery and will hasten the time when you discover you're feeling human again.

Here are some "tricks of the trade" that work for others and thus may be helpful to you.

1. Perhaps most important of all, especially in the early stages, is to submit to grief. Let it come, give in to it, don't fight it. Cry, and as the saying goes, let it all hang out – often alone but sometimes with a loving friend. This is nature's healing process. By being stoic, not ever letting go, you block or delay your recovery. And what good is that?
2. Talk about your grief, your loss, with anyone close to you, especially if they too loved your wife or husband. It is quite likely that others are just as anxious to talk about it as you are, and they will take their cue from you. Talking offers useful and welcome therapy, so don't be reluctant to use it.
3. Accept all the invitations you can, even if your impulse is to say no. You need to get out of yourself and to see other people. Invariably it helps, gives you a boost, mentally and physically.
4. In connection with #3 above, a truly rewarding investment is a telephone-answering device. I protested the idea but was given one anyway. Without it, I would have missed the majority of the opportunities I received to hear from and to be with others.

Besides, it is a welcome sight to return to your empty home to find messages for you on your machine. It testifies the world has not forgotten you.

5. Keep a television or radio next to your bed. When you wake up and the crushing thoughts of your loss wash over you, this immediate contact with the outside world is diverting, often comforting, and can even soothe you back to sleep. A cassette player, with your own favorite music ready to go, is also beneficial. I, for one, resort to all three devices at different times of the day and continue to find this very helpful.
6. Within your capabilities, set aside a preferred time each day for some form of challenging exercise (aside from household chores and errands). Unless you have been committed to regular exercise, it will probably be a real effort for you to initiate and to maintain a physical program at this time. But the rewards are worth everything you put into it in improving your emotional state, making you feel better physically, and helping you get a better night's sleep. Eventually you will be so aware of the many benefits of exercise, you will not want to miss a day of whatever activity you choose. Fast walking over a gradually increasing distance is convenient in all but the worst weather.
7. If you don't have a pet, think seriously about getting one. Having another "being" to love and to care for not only helps to counteract the emptiness of being alone but makes you feel needed and takes you out of yourself. Recent surveys have demonstrated specific physical and emotional benefits in pet ownership. Having a responsibility gives purpose to living.
8. During a talk show not long ago, George Burns spoke of his inability to sleep after Gracie died until, one night, he left his own bed and got into hers. He said he has slept well ever since. Putting yourself into whatever place was usually occupied by your loved one helps fill a painfully vacant space at those times of day or evening when you least want to be reminded of your loss. Why stare at that empty chair? Sit in it yourself.
9. For an indeterminate time, your consciousness will be filled with thoughts of the person you have lost. Eventually, as you begin to turn to other things, you may feel a sense of disloyalty, a reluctance to let your loved one go. You must resist the temptation "to tend a legend." Life does go on under quite different circumstances. Continue to cherish great memories but allow (indeed promote) the building of a new life on your own, for this is a significant step in the healing process.
10. This "trick of the trade" has been alluded to but demands its own spotlight. It is the process of getting out of yourself. The most beneficial way to do this is not through purely social contacts, which are very important, but in doing something for others. Make a call on those in trouble, do errands for someone who is incapacitated, take part in some group or organization that matters. What you need so badly at this time is a diversion from your grief, a boost to your self-esteem, a substitute for emptiness. Doing something for someone else has twice the benefit of doing it for yourself.

IN SUMMARY

Without question, recovery from devastating grief requires effort, more of a day-by-day effort than you have made for any other purpose. There are so many things you must force yourself to do that are either new to you or demand more than your physical and emotional strength would seem to permit. But those of us who have made this dreadful journey emphasize to you that this maximum effort does pay off. It brings you more quickly to a tolerable existence, to the time when you are surprised to realize that living is indeed easier, and recovery begins to be a part of your awareness.

To make this essential effort, you need all the help you can get from any source; family, friends, your religious faith. Additional help or inspiration will come to you as you read or hear things that ring a bell for you. Here are two thoughts I came across and carried in my wallet for reference on demand. Perhaps you will find them helpful until you gather statements of your own.

What keeps us going is not anything we are conscious of, but rather a blind, insistent longing that this emptiness be filled again.

Exceptionality in us human beings only has an opportunity to shine under demanding circumstances.

Finally...that overworked cliché: **TIME DOES HELP**. I admit to wanting to scream whenever some well-intentioned person fed me this line. But now, as a fellow sufferer, I repeat it to you because it is true. The inexorable passage of time does heal the dreadful wound, especially if you help it along with what has been discussed here. Millions have "gone through the eye of the storm" before you, have survived, and gradually have found joy again. Be confident that you will too.

POSTSCRIPT

There is nothing in my life as a pastor that is any harder or more important to me than the opportunity my position affords me to be with people who are grieving.

In such times I always seem to experience the moments of my deepest faith and moments when I wonder if faith isn't some cruel invention. There is such sadness and it hurts so very much to lose the people who are your life. There is nothing about such devastation that is good or which comes to us from the hand of God.

And yet, our faith tradition at its best was born precisely out of the fire of great travail. It's the faith known, as Harry put it elsewhere in this booklet, by people who dared to keep on through the eye of the storm and survived. It's the faith of that early poet of our scriptures who through his tears of loneliness and exile wrote, "By the waters of Babylon,

there we sat down and wept..." and then asked, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

How, indeed? Nevertheless, it is my prayer for all of you who read this practical guide, written by a fellow traveler, that you will know the God who is present to us all, but most especially to those who travel the rocky byways of the foreign land of loss and grief.

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