

FACING LIFE ALONE AGAIN

Loss of a Spouse at a Young Age Leaves Many People Without Emotional Support

When her husband was killed in a freak accident in 1987 while pruning a limb from a tree on Halloween, Ann Lee was left with three children under age 5, her husband's successful business she would have to dismantle, and the shock of suddenly being a single mother at 28.

The death of Lee's husband brought an immediate outpouring of help from family and friends in the Georgetown area, two weeks of donated dinners, a neighborhood fund drive, moral support and attention that temporarily cushioned the family from the full impact of the tragedy. Surprised by the kindness, she also was surprised when it was replaced by a subtle impatience from peers who wanted her sadness to quickly subside.

"You're allowed to talk about it for a few weeks, maybe a month, then you're considered a complainer. People really want you to bounce back and get on with your life," she said. "It's just not happening that fast."

Every year 800,000 people are widowed in this country, and more than one third are younger than age 45. People who die young are most often killed by accidents, and for those who lose a spouse suddenly, studies show, the effects may be particularly severe and long lasting. In a 1987 study by University of Michigan researchers on the long-term effects of losing a spouse or child in a motor vehicle crash, up to 85 percent of bereaved spouses and parents were still mulling over the loss four to seven years later.

There is growing evidence that the grieving process is not nearly as brief or transitory as had been traditionally thought. The earliest studies of grief done in 1944 examined survivor reactions to a nightclub fire in Boston in which 491 people were killed. Researcher Erich Lindemann optimistically concluded it was often possible to reconcile the death of a loved one in four to six weeks. Today, in most mental health circles, grieving is believed to occur in predictable stages. Shock, denial, anger,

despair, depression and acceptance are all common reactions of the bereaved. While not uniform or orderly, the process may take months, sometimes years.

In an article she wrote after her husband died in a commuter plane crash four years ago, Peggy Eastman, 47, a Chevy Chase writer, called grief "an untidy and overlapping process: The griever takes two steps forward and one back, or one step forward and one back, or gets stuck in one place for a while. There is no correct way to grieve and no time limit."

For young widows, the prospect of recovery is complicated for several reasons, says Baltimore author and counselor Adele Rice Nudel, whose book "Starting Over, Help for Young Widows & Widowers (1986, Dodd, Mead & Co., \$16.95) is one of the few guides for people widowed at an early age.

"Feeling isolated is the biggest difference between older and younger widowed people," says Nudel. "Losing a spouse when you're in your sixties or seventies is no less painful, but there is a much better chance that there are other widowed elderly out there to share the loss with. Most young widowed people don't have a single acquaintance their age who knows what they are going through."

Furthermore, to be young and widowed is like walking around with a contagious disease, says Sheila Lichter, a third-grade teacher in suburban Baltimore whose husband died of a heart attack at age 45. "It's almost like people identify too much or think they could be next. I could see people backing away from me as if they were thinking 'but for the grace of God it could have been us.'"

Nudel cites a series of other reasons that compound the difficulties for young widows: financial problems, children's grief, inappropriate parental and in-law demands, and a sketchy blueprint for how a young person is supposed to act in mourning.

“I didn’t have anything black to wear to the funeral, but it seemed silly to be thinking about that,” recalls Lee. “There was no one to ask.”

This lack of support for young mourners is explored by anthropologists in a report on bereavement published in 1985 by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS). The study blames society’s ambiguity about appropriate grieving behavior and the privacy of mourning in Western countries. Wrote one researcher, “The lack of social prescriptions concerning mourning and bereavement may result in serious adjustment and recovery problems for the recently bereaved.”

Within several days of the death of her husband in a kayak accident, U.S. Army Lt. Laura Pierce, 24, had packed up all of his belongings, disposed of his uniforms and left West Germany, where they had been stationed together for 18 months. She was given a “compassionate reassignment” in the U.S. and a new job at the Pentagon. In the days that followed, she watched bereaved relatives cry passionately over her husband’s death but found she couldn’t cry herself. “In the Army you learn there is no time for emotional instability,” she says.

“I just don’t know whether I’m grieving the right way,” says Pierce. “I need to know that what I’m doing is normal because something feels wrong. I keep waiting to let out my feelings, but it just doesn’t happen.”

There is a service for military widows, but Pierce found it unresponsive, she thinks because they were not set up for 24-year-old widows. “I think they thought I was calling for my mother or something.” She decided to seek help from a support group for widowed persons.

In the Washington D.C. area, there is a small but growing support group service which was started ...by Ira Nerken, 37, whose wife was killed by a hit-and-run driver just months after the couple was married. The Yale and Harvard-educated attorney no longer practices law but devotes full time to writing and grief counseling. He readily admits his own grieving is far from over but strongly believes that so-called “grief work” done in groups like his can help fill the void.

“This is not a social get-together over wine and cheese. In this group, you must have some willingness to stay with the pain and convert it into meaning.” Nerken says. “Most people come after the initial denial and shock has given over to the reality that the spouse is gone forever. There is a lot of hard work between recognizing that and beginning to rebuild.”

Support groups and other forms of grief counseling also offer freedom to express feelings, sometimes strange ones that come as a surprise. In one study by Harvard researchers in 1987, 15 percent of grieving persons said they “felt just like” the dead person, 9 percent had pain or other symptoms resembling those of the final illness, and 12 percent at some point began to think they had the same illness. Another study cited 40 percent who at some time thought they might be losing their minds.

Widows say grieving is hard work and commonly complain of depression and exhaustion, both of which others tolerate less in young people than in older widows. Physical reactions are also common—weakness, insomnia, loss of appetite, headaches, back pain, indigestion, shortness of breath, heart palpitations, dizziness and nausea.

But the NAS study indicates that grieving may take a real toll on a person’s physical as well as mental health. The study cites links between grieving and specific diseases, especially heart disease. “The mortality rate from cardiovascular disease was 10 times higher for young widowers than for married men of the same age.” The report also put young women (ages 20 to 24) at seven times the risk of dying from eight different diseases, including cardiovascular-related illnesses, following the loss of a spouse.

Recovery is an elusive term when it is applied to bereavement. Celia Ward, a therapist ...who specializes in bereavement counseling, describes recovery as “when the bereaved can finally think of the dead person without overwhelming sadness and invest energy in other thoughts and activities.”

Nerken says recovery begins when the pain becomes manageable and the griever is able to think about the future again. Nudel believes, from counseling hundreds of young widowed

people, that within three years the bereaved are ready in most cases, to start new lives.

According to the 1987 Harvard University report, studies indicate that grief is quicker and more complete when the marriage was happy, but survivors of unhappy marriages showed higher incidences of depression, anxiety, poor health and yearning two to four years after the death. A four-year study in San Diego reported that 70 percent of widowed people were interested in sexual intimacy again within four years.

The need for sexual intimacy is just another question mark for young widows and widowers. Approaching new intimate relationships seems to epitomize the point of recovery and an aspect of mourning about which society is still unsure.

Four months after her husband's death seven years ago in a car accident, preschool administrator Laurie Bradshaw, 33, Worcester, Mass, was dating. "I knew what others thought.

That I hadn't waited long enough, or I didn't love him. But you can't care about what other people think. You just have to get on with your life the best way you can."

There are things that help, says Lee. People willing to listen even months after the death, friends who aren't afraid to reminisce, affiliations with a church, and now a support group where she feels that there are others who can understand her loss.

But Lee, like other young widowed people doesn't want to be pushed into "getting better." She's rather people avoided platitudes about time healing and everything being all right. She's grateful when others allow her children to talk or cry about their Dad. And she has left her husband's coffee cup upside down on the table upstairs where he put it last Halloween. She says she will pick it up and do something with it when she's ready.

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