

Notes on Widows Grief Research Meeting
Sunday, November 25, 2018 at Hebron Presbyterian Church

Useful Resources:

Restore My Soul: A Grief Companion—Lorraine Peterson

The Third Layer: Discovering Comfort—Doug Manning (4th book in series?)

Hospice

Funeral home brochures (Grief groups with strangers did not seem helpful)

Therapy

Challenges the new widow has to face:

1. Coming back to ones church for the first time and sitting without ones husband. It very much helped that a woman called and said “I’ll sit with you.” It’s almost easier to go to another church
2. The difficult time is before death if that death is anticipated. I felt isolated. It was helpful to have prepared meals. People coming to visit my husband were helpful. I appreciated people visiting me (the spouse) as well. Do call ahead to insure it’s a good time.
3. Thinking that I will never get over this grief.
4. Having a sounding board, a person to help you make decisions.
5. Going to a nice restaurant by oneself for the first time.
6. A feeling of “What is the purpose of living?” Suicidal moments.
7. Never feeling that one should have fun after my spouse has died. Feeling guilty for laughing again.
8. Wanting to say, “I love you” just once more.

Helps:

1. The minister coming to visit me and allowing me to share memories.
2. Creating a memory book with my husband in the last weeks of his life. We could do Q&A, write memories, select photos.
3. Making a recording of my husband’s voice (from voicemail or wherever) just to listen to occasionally.
4. Friends.
5. Having someone to come for an hour during hospice just to read to my husband and give me an hour’s break.
6. Always begin a phone conversation by asking, “Is this a good time?”
7. People coming to the hospital.
8. Please don’t be negative about me, the spouse.
9. Lighting a candle in a church service and speaking the loved ones name.
10. Have a good cry.

11. Take the widow to lunch.
12. That the congregation offers a full, caring reception afterwards.
13. Have a brief descriptive obituary notice in the church bulletin.
14. The church needs to do a better job of being aware of crises and asking what will help.
15. Provide transportation to get groceries.
16. If the death is a process, remind the spouses that they are not forgotten—by the church or by God.
17. Draw upon a strong image (such as your mother) and remember to look ahead.
18. Discover God's learning for me in this and how God is looking over me.
19. Invite the widow to a Wednesday Night Supper so the ice can be broken gradually. It's sometimes hard to face a wall of compassion at one time (as on a Sunday morning).

Methods for Coping Vary With Each Person. Some Approaches:

1. Turn a page. Accept the situation. Think of the future. Your loved one wouldn't want you to stay grieving.
2. Therapy allowed me to let out the anger. I wrote down my feelings each day.
3. Getting tasks to do, even if just reading a book.
4. Get out and help someone else. Drive someone to do a chore. DO something.
5. Feel that you have permission to grieve as long as is necessary for YOU. Grief is like peeling an onion and so will not be over instantly but will reappear in other ways. Take your time at your speed and in your way.
6. Hold to your faith and accept that God is in charge.
7. Donate money to a church fund in memory of my husband. (Is that a memorial fund at Hebron? How does that fund work? **Scott** will follow up on that.)
8. Sometimes the widow does want to be alone.
9. Perhaps having a widows group meet occasionally just to share everyday issues.

Not helpful:

1. For someone to patly say "This is God's will or God's perfect timing." The widow does take comfort in God's sovereignty, but does not want easily platitudes.
2. Do NOT make important decisions quickly (like deciding to move, etc.).

THEY'RE AFRAID OF MY TEARS

BY KIM MCLARIN

A FRIEND OF MINE yet grieves her mother. I take her out for wine and let her talk and cry and talk. As we leave the restaurant, she tells me she almost did not accept my invitation. "I was afraid you'd try to cheer me up."

It's not surprising: Cheering the person up is the default reaction by many people when confronted with grief or pain or suffering. During the long, hard slog of a very serious depression, when I would call out to friends for help stepping back from the edge, more often than not what came back were cheerful platitudes or earnest injunctions to put on a happy face. For a long time this reaction hurt me; I took it as evidence of indifference, at best. But gradually I realized what I was witnessing was neither indifference nor disregard nor even emotional obliviousness. What it was, was fear. Other people's emotions are scary. Almost as scary as our own.

Emotions are universal but not their expression: Culture shapes how we display what we feel—and how we feel about that display. In America, the most socially acceptable emotions are happiness and anger, though not necessarily in that order and not necessarily for everyone. Anger in men is acceptable, even prized; anger in women isn't. Ditto for white people versus people who are not white. In class we read Malcolm X's "By any means necessary," and the students cry, "He's so angry!" We read Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death!" and they say, "He's so brave."

In any event, the lower-register emotions—sadness, disheartenment, despair—are especially frightening to many of us. I was not far into my midlife dating sojourn before realizing expressing an emotion deeper than eyelash-batting happiness was the quickest way to send most men running for the door. Since I am a writer and the writer's job, I believe, is to look straight into the heart of what it means to be human in the world, and since emotions are intricately

connected to that human experience, this made dating challenging. "You seem to feel things more deeply than other people," one guy told me. "It's terrifying."

Another guy asked me straight out: "Do you feel your feelings?"

"Of course," I said. "Don't you?"

He shrugged. "I don't think I do."

To say there's a price to pay for all this fear of feelings seems obvious. For this particular guy, the price was an experience of living so dampened it was like having coffee with a wet sock. For relationships (of all kinds) it means

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a kind of superficial skating along the top: It's all texting and cross-monologues and having a beer while we root for the team, and then people go home and cry in the dark. For society the price is higher still: Setting aside the very real issue of gun lust, it seems clear

that a toxic inability to deal with pain and disappointment contributes to America's epidemic of gun violence, in all its terrible forms.

In her essay "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," Audre Lorde argues that Western privileging of intellect over emotion serves to uphold patriarchy and white supremacy. The way out of the trap, she says, is not through our heads but through our hearts.

"As we come into touch with our own, ancient, non-European consciousness of living as a situation to be experienced and interacted with, we learn more and more to cherish our feelings and to respect those hidden sources of our power from where true knowledge, and therefore lasting action, comes."

Feel your feelings. No one else can. ■

*McLarin '86 is a novelist, essayist, and playwright and an associate professor at Emerson College. Her latest book, *Womanish: A Grown Black Woman Speaks on Love and Life*, will be published in October.*