

Finding Your Way After the Death of a Spouse

-- Erin Diehl

“Erin—help me, help me—I think I’m dying,” Dave cried out. And then he was gone.

It had been only three months since we had received the diagnosis of cancer of the lungs in an advanced state. We were both stunned because Dave had always been unusually healthy. The doctors had found nothing wrong in previous checkups.

Before we received the results of the X-rays, I promised Dave, my husband of 43 years, that I would be strong no matter what. And strong I was—through the grueling three months of illness, during the funeral Mass, at the burial, at the reception so kindly arranged by women from my parish. I went on and on and *on* being strong!

Eighteen months later I have encountered what one writer calls “delayed grief.” And I have learned a very valuable lesson: We must allow ourselves to grieve and we all grieve in different ways, for various lengths of time.

In one of the books I read on grief, I came across the phrase “creative survivor.” What a hopeful term! That is what Dave would want me to be. I can almost hear him saying in his calm and loving and practical way, “O.K., Erin, now get on with your life. Just put one foot in front of the other and keep going.”

This does not mean that I do not have excruciating times of missing him. It just means I profit by the wisdom I know he would impart to me and which I hope to impart to you here:

- **Take steps to relieve loneliness.** Loneliness is a constant companion. I rationalize that everyone is lonely at times, even married people. Yet coming home to find no one to share news with is a debilitating “downer.” Evenings and nights have been the worst times for me. Occupying those long evening hours can ease the void. Always having been a “book-in-hand meditator,” I turned to books on grief very naturally. I spent many sleepless nights poring over them and found much solace. I also used tapes on grief. Praying always helps me, and keeping a journal can provide a healing catharsis as well. Television can be diverting at times, but since it is such a passive occupation, it might prove depressing. I find that radio, especially National Public Radio, provides a welcome relief. Music of all types can be a real mood-elevator. Pets, too, can be a source of comfort. My dogs run over and paw me for attention at my first sign of tears. Who could resist such unabashed affection?

- **Let others help you.** Reach out to others and allow them to help carry that heavy pain which is constantly with you in the early days of grief. Stoicism will not help, but there are many persons who will if you give them an idea of your needs and desires. The outpouring of love you receive from family and friends can be a tremendous source of comfort and unity. When invitations come from friends and relatives, you may find them difficult to accept, however, I find it best to accept as many as possible. Realize that the telephone is a two-way instrument, and that you may call people as well as expecting them to call you. Some people will not know what to say to you. They may even avoid you entirely. This is just a fact and you should not allow it to hurt you too deeply. Expect changes in your relationships. Your social life may not be couple-oriented to any great extent anymore. Although your married friends want to include you, their life-style is different. You can make valuable new friendships with other widowed or single persons. I cannot say enough good things about support groups. I belong to two different parish-based groups. I also made a Beginning Experience weekend (for widowed or divorced people) and a weekend retreat on “Coping With Grief.” Shared tears and laughter are healing; trying to help others is a potent pain reliever.

- **Ease your adjustment as best you can.** At this time of change, you would be wise not to make hasty decisions about anything—selling your home, dispensing with personal effects, making major purchases, or any other significant changes. Avail yourself of practical helps to ease your adjustment. Our lawyer helped me through the legal mishmash after Dave’s death. Family friends and business associates also provided valuable advice. Because this period of grief and adjustment can be so stressful, you will need to maintain your strength with a nutritious diet. And physical exercise, especially walking, helps to clear out the cobwebs. Grieving is very fatiguing, so rest at night even if you cannot sleep. Relaxation techniques might be helpful. Let yourself cry when you need to. Allow yourself to be reflective and don’t worry if you do not seem to be getting much accomplished for a while. As you make adjustments in your life, you may find you are developing greater independence. I have gained new confidence in my own actions and decisions, and I like the feeling of overcoming natural fears which might keep me from doing things. I feel pride and pleasure about the new paths I am following in my education and my work.

- **Rely on your faith.** Whatever your religion, it can be your main strength in living on. When Dave died, his brother Tom, who is a priest, and our four grown children came immediately. Tom said Mass while I sat by the bed holding Dave’s hand, with the children gathered around. Suddenly, the sun rose outside the window in a blaze of red and gold. What a beautiful resurrection! God had painted a picture I’m sure Dave

appreciated as he joined his heavenly Father—a Father he had known so well that as a child he had called him “Skipper.” Waling with God through my grief has deepened my faith. I never felt really angry with God because I knew that my loving God did not “zap” me with this circumstance. God will walk with you, too. Yet you must realize that your grief my not be finished at some certain point you have in mind. At 18 months, I feel the loss with even greater intensity at times. It does not last as long as before, however. If you are feeling “stuck” in grief, an understanding therapist might be in order—especially if you have more than fleeting thoughts of suicide. Mainly, I think it helps to consider that you are an integral part of God’s plan and precious to God beyond measure.

- **Do not dwell on regrets.** The doctors had told me privately that Dave could live as long as six months or as little as three. But he was determined to adopt a positive attitude in hopes of getting well. In reply to telephone calls from friends, I often heard him say, “Oh, I have just a ‘touch of cancer’”! I did not want to tell Dave his cancer was terminal because he obviously did not want to hear it. One night when I asked him why he seemed to be shutting me out, he told me he did not intend to, that he was just too ill to talk about it. I now feel we missed something by not being able to communicate as well about this as we always had about everything else. But I try not to swell on what I could have done better. I did the best I could. So did he. If you fell regretful about something you did or did not do before your spouse died, try to be gentle with yourself. This person who loved you so much would not judge you so harshly; neither should you submit yourself to such painful hindsight.

I have days when it seems that such a big piece has been ripped from my life that only a paging hole is left. Yet I also have days of celebrating new beginnings. My life and my roles are different now, and many of the changes I have experienced are positive ones. I am learning every day how to be a “creative survivor.” And I trust that you will too.