

## **Til death do us part; Why then can't we part?**

by [Christine Sarno-Doyle](#)

I once belonged to a support group of women who are involved with widowers. I'll bet most of you are unaware that such a group exists. Well, it does. Why, you ask? The answer is that widowers are more likely than not to get involved in relationships before



they are emotionally ready to do so. And in the majority of cases, the result is a heartbreak trail of emotional turmoil for them and the women with whom they are involved. Do women move on before they are ready? Yes, women too. Is there a support group for men who are involved with widows? I don't know. I doubt it. Men wouldn't invest the time and energy to nurture a relationship to that extent. Women do, hence our group.

We talked about why widowers got involved in relationships too soon. Responses varied from the profound to the simplistic. There was truth in each. But I couldn't answer the question as it applied to anyone else. What I could answer was how it applied to me.

Reflecting, I thought about my own journey. I had also lost a spouse. Five years after I had lost my mother and five months after my son was born, I was a widow at 19. The trauma was life altering. I was emotionally bankrupt. I tried to move on, albeit ineffectually. Looking back on my own experience gave me a partial answer to the question. Someone can honestly think they are ready to move on when they are not.

Shock, numbness is how I describe my emotional state after my loss. Denial: plainly descriptive. Unacquainted with the five stages of grief that Elisabeth Kubler-Ross eloquently explains in her books on death and dying: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance, I experienced only denial and depression. I wanted to make it all go away. My memories today resonate with a decision I made; I wasn't going to give up living, not like my dad had done when he lost my mom. The difference in the number of years of marriage was striking, theirs being sixteen and my own a year and a half. But the loss of the dream was stark.

I was determined to get back to living. Then doubt appeared. Is it too soon? How do I move on and say goodbye? Wasn't I supposed to love this person forever? Wasn't my father supposed to love my mother forever? How does one negotiate this territory? I had never thought my father should give up living after my mother died. What would that accomplish? Martyrdom? Does one life end because another's does? Should one life even be stunted? How could that be? If that were true, how could I stop fully living with a son to raise? How would my turning my back on life benefit him?

Neither my life, nor my sibling's lives benefited from my father neglecting his. He remained too enmeshed in his grief and guilt and in the commemorating of a memory to live. We were negatively affected by his choice. I loved him dearly, but the emotional and psychological injuries we endured affected more than just our four lifetimes. We have our own children now who in one way or another were affected by our early lack of emotional development.

People learn to let go. We all have our individual lives to live. Living fully is how we honor life. People come into our lives and leave in all fashion. Those who pass on don't have expectations that we will stop living and loving. Love transcends earthly notions of ego and possessiveness. I made a conscious decision to get on with living.

I smile now when I think of that "conscious decision". I was conscious only in the sense I was not comatose. I certainly wasn't aware of and was certainly ill-prepared to deal with the emotional minefield I would traverse.

Do you know that emotional baggage gets heavier and more cumbersome with each year it is left unattended? Well, it does. Liken it to compounding interest.

Nevertheless, I set off with chin up and shoulders back. I went out with friends. I dated. I went to parties. I awed everyone with my stalwart appearance. I awed even myself. The façade was so effective. How terribly wrong could something be that seemed so real? Everything I did masked the grief.

Did anyone around me realize my emotional state? Did anyone know the effects of unresolved grief? Did anyone know this was a process, about denial, repressed emotions? Did anyone know that when it all surfaced it would be immobilizing?

My experience has taught me that there is a process in grieving, and it's not with your chin up and a stiff upper lip. It is walking through the grief. It is feeling the pain. There is no going around grief, only through.

I remember an analogy I heard when I was coping with all the feelings that were surfacing and my not wanting to deal with them.

*Trying not to grieve is like living everyday holding a beach ball underwater. You expend so much energy keeping the ball under water you have that much less energy and cognitive ability to deal with daily life. It's when you finally let go of the ball and let it surface that you move on with resources and clarity.*

So, in thinking about the question, why do widowers get involved too soon? Another part of my answer: they can't be so dissimilar to me. They want to move on too. They want to feel what they felt before. They want to be happy. They want to live life fully. Not in the shadow of the past, but in the light of the present and an eye on the beacon that is their future.

But who is telling them today that there is a process to work through before they embark? Will they heed any suggestion that there are emotional issues to deal with before they proceed? Will they acknowledge that they will face life challenges that they are ill-prepared to deal with? Would I have listened? I'm too far beyond that to answer it accurately, I don't know.

I am now married to a former widower. There was no one to walk him through the maze either. To be honest, he is one man who wouldn't have heeded any warning. Our stories are quite different: number of years with a former love and number of children. There are also differences in how we both got on with our lives, although both inefficiently.

One major difference though rested in our support networks. Because I was widowed at such a young age, I think I was expected to move on. I was encouraged to find a new love. I found and still find this support half-hearted for my husband. I sense an expectation that he live as some sort of commemorative plaque one foot planted firmly in the past as to not allow him to move completely into the present and his own future.

We marry and promise to love forever. When that loved one is gone, how do you not keep that promise? Widows and widowers deal with these questions. We deal with survivor's guilt. How can I be happy when he or she has died, suffered? Why couldn't it have been me and not her/him? It's excruciating.

Add to our own grief and guilt, the torchbearers, family, and friends of the deceased, who exasperate already raw emotions and the emotional turmoil can become overwhelming. Others too have suffered their own tragic loss of a mother, father, son, daughter, sister, brother, other. But a widow or widower shouldn't be expected to shoulder anyone else's grief. It's a minefield of emotions that we neither ask for nor expect. We really do want to move on.

So, why do widowers get involved in relationships too soon? I now have the answer: No one is talking about why they shouldn't. We as a society are so engrossed in the dream that we don't address the reality. No one wants to think about it never mind talk about it. Our egos scream out not to be forgotten or replaced. Yet that isn't reality either, neither occurs. Love is honored in our hearts.

We do not disrespect the past or a memory by moving forward with life. In fact, not doing so is a disregard of life.

Finish grieving so that you don't bring unresolved grief into your new relationship. Don't expect a new love to be a grief counselor – he or she cannot possibly play the role of lover and counselor. Know that a new relationship brings with it a new person with unique likes, dislikes, dreams and hopes. Be prepared to accept those differences. Have no expectations that a new love will cede to how things used to be. Things are not how they used to be.

We don't talk about these things because we're afraid of hurt feelings, of seeming disrespectful, or uncaring. I am none of those things. I am a loving compassionate individual. I don't want to be silent anymore. What does that silence accomplish? It keeps us in denial. And I lived in that state for too long early in life. It is unhealthy.

What I am living is a truth. It is an acclamation of the human spirit. Fully loving again is not a less than before. It is neither immoral nor should it be guilt-producing. Why not talk about all of this? Why not cultivate hope? Most people will face this situation

in their lives. Few couples will die at the same time. So, maybe we accept that pain will be inevitable. It is the suffering that is optional.

Maybe it's time we start a dialogue to share what we as widows and widowers live, what we as women involved with widowers know. The subject of loving again shouldn't be taboo. We do not have to tread so lightly with the subject of love, loss, and moving on. In the end its acceptance that as much as we feel we will love forever; death is when we part.

July 2007