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James LaVeck: “Anticipate triggers”

Anticipate triggers. They will always be there, whether it's a date, a place, finding something tucked in a drawer. When you spend the time thinking about how you want to feel ahead of time, the intensity of the actual event tends to be less. The world seems to be reeling from one crisis to another. We've [...]

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By [Pirie Jones Grossman](#)



Anticipate triggers. They will always be there, whether it's a

date, a place, finding something tucked in a drawer. When you spend the time thinking about how you want to feel ahead of time, the intensity of the actual event tends to be less.

The world seems to be reeling from one crisis to another. We've experienced a global pandemic, economic uncertainty, political and social turmoil. Then there are personal traumas that people are dealing with, such as the loss of a loved one, health issues, unemployment, divorce or the loss of a job.

Coping with change can be traumatic as it often affects every part of our lives. How do you deal with loss or change in your life? What coping strategies can you use? Do you ignore them and just push through, or do you use specific techniques?

In this series called "5 Things You Need To Heal After a Dramatic Loss Or Life Change" we are interviewing successful people who were able to heal after a difficult life change such as the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, or other personal hardships. We are also talking to Wellness experts, Therapists, and Mental Health Professionals who can share lessons from their experience and research.

As a part of this interview series, I had the pleasure of interviewing James LaVeck. James LaVeck is an American Author and Blogger of Life After Losses, a memoir and self-help book about his experiences being widowed twice before the age of 48. He currently resides in New England as a single father with two teenagers and in addition to writing and studying acting, works as a project manager for a global software company.

James LaVeck - 5 Things I Believe You Need ...



Thank you so much for doing this with us! Before we start, our readers would love to “get to know you” a bit better. Can you tell us a bit about your childhood backstory?

Oh, my goodness! Thank you for having me again! Your readers might remember me from the earlier series about reinventing oneself in the second half of life. That reinvention could only take place because I’m a double widower.

But before we get to that, let me answer your question. I was, for three years, the youngest of two children. The birth of my baby brother forced me into the middle child role. It likely shaped my personality and desire for perfection more than I’d like to admit.

My parents divorced when I was three and my mother, who emigrated to the US from Germany, raised us by herself. She worked hard, instilled the same work ethic in us, and made sure we had what we needed, and in most cases, managed to help us have what we wanted. We didn’t always have it easy; lack of child support payments led us to some time on public assistance with food stamps, cheese, and peanut butter. We had what we needed, and that was usually enough.

As children of divorcees, we shuttled between households frequently when we were younger. It was evident our father and his new wife weren’t always happy about that, and to be fair, neither were we for the most part.

In and around the 4th Grade, I started having feelings for one of my teachers. He happened to be a man. It wasn’t until years later, and after I’d even learned about human sexuality, that I realized I had a crush on him. It wasn’t until after high school and dating several girls that I finally admitted what I’d been too afraid to do in the small, rural town in which I matured.

Can you please give us your favorite “Life Lesson Quote”? Can you share how that was relevant to you in your life?

I shared last time a professional quote and a personal quote. I think for the context of this discussion, the personal quote is appropriate: “it gets easier.” My dear friend, Bea, who’s now passed and wasn’t a friend at the time, said these words to me a few days after my first husband died in 1995. I was at a grief support group, and this short, older woman approached me with her big, bright eyes and told me, “it gets easier.” She smiled as she said it, and I thought she had no grasp of reality to smile at me and tell me something like that. But she was right. Through the years, I learned it does actually get better. Oh, that’s not to say the hurt leaves. Not at all. The pain never went away, but it did get easier.

You have been blessed with much success. In your opinion, what are the top three qualities that you possess that have helped you accomplish so much? If you can, please share a story or example for each.

I have been fortunate, and I am grateful every day for the life I have (when I’m not cursing at something else).

Besides the business qualities I mentioned last time (fearlessness, flexibility, and work ethic), I’d like to look at this segment of “success” in life and how I’ve faced and overcome the challenges life has thrown at me. My mother would think I’m tempting fate by “putting the Devil on the wall.” I’ve written about my life being a big cosmic joke to G-d (do you want to make G-d laugh? Tell Him your plans.)

1. A sense of humor. I’ve learned life is too short without a laugh. You have to be able to laugh at the absurdity of life sometimes.
2. Gratefulness. This one is, admittedly, hard. How do you feel grateful when you’re in the middle of grieving? I actually found myself doing so, and when I recognized what it was, I was in shock.
3. Compassion. There’s a lot of suffering in our world. I can’t help everyone or even half the people I meet, but I can treat everyone with compassion, knowing that we are all more alike than we are not.

Let's now shift to the main part of our discussion about 'Healing after Loss'. Do you feel comfortable sharing with our readers about your dramatic loss or life change?

Yes, I'm absolutely comfortable sharing. While I was widowed twice, there are actually 4 events in my life that I think were life-changing. I wrote a book that was just published in January, which included these events.

The first dramatic loss or life change for me was, I believe, 1986. This was the year I would die, or rather nearly die. I don't know that either of those statements is false. What I do know is that I had a near-death experience after crashing into the back of a van while riding a moped. I was told the helmet, the one with a large crack down the middle, was the only thing to save my life. But after I came out of whatever state I was in, I felt a peace in me that eluded me for 18 years, despite trying to find it in Church or anywhere else. I came out of that state with full belief, knowledge, and conviction that I was exactly as I was intended to be—a gay male.

I broke up with my girlfriend, one I had expected to propose to. I also spent the next several years trying to reconcile my faith and spirituality with my newfound revelation and newly admitted sexuality.

The second event took place on August 14, 1995, at 11:35am PDT. I held my husband's hand and heard a sound I'd not heard from him in 7 years. I called my mom to join me; she was helping me take care of him in his final days. We both held a hand. We both cried and told him it was okay to go, though I didn't mean it. He'd suffered enough the prior 6 months. A squeeze of my hand, a final gasp, and a rattle in his throat. He was gone, and here I was, a 28-year-old widower.

The third event took place in October 2008. I had been working with a company for over 8 years when in 2006, they laid me off with several hundred others in an attempt to "right size." I got up, brushed myself off, and formed a partnership with a dear friend for a boutique consulting firm that catered to community banks and guaranteed performance improvements. I had a contract that ended in October 2008, and the floor fell out of the financial services industry. Banks stopped spending money (even to save more), and my contract was not renewed. I would spend the next 9 months looking for work, doing what I could to take care of my

family, which, at this point, included a husband of nine years, a 6-year-old daughter, and a 5-year-old son.

The fourth event took place on January 24, 2014. We had moved to New England 2 ½ years prior from Southern California. I traveled for work every week, and I had gotten home around 2:00am hearing snoring from the master bedroom. I opted to sleep in the guest bedroom. I woke later that morning, snoring still emanating from behind the door. I got the kids ready for school, took them, returned home to shower, and then went to a doctor's appointment. By the time I got home around 11:30am or so, saw the cleaning ladies, and no signs of my husband downstairs, I went upstairs. I was not prepared for what I saw and immediately called 9-1-1.

What was the scariest part of that event? What did you think was the worst thing that could happen to you? How did you react in the short term?

1. I was 18 years old, and I almost died. *THAT* was the scariest thing, but coming to grips with and accepting my sexual orientation so freely brought its own challenges. It was the middle of the AIDS crisis; conservatism and anti-gay legislation were being pushed on us. Fear came in the form of not knowing what "they" were going to do.
2. The scariest part of my first husband dying was ... everything. We'd had 7 years together. I was only 28 when he died. We'd built a life together and had just bought a house together less than 6 months before the diagnosis. I didn't know what was going to happen. Period. In the short term, all I could think about was getting through the memorial service. I was in a fog and had to do one small task at a time because that was the level of focus I could maintain. It didn't help that my short-term, moving into long-term, reaction was to drink excessively to escape and numb any feelings I had.
3. The financial collapse of 2008 was frightening and eye-opening. And altogether frustrating. Frustrating in that, with the consulting practice, we offered the most needed services by smaller community banks to stay competitive and in

business—and banks were just not spending money. Frustrating also because I spent 9 months sending out resumes, searching job boards, looking for temporary work. I applied for anything, and everything and I simply could not get back into the job market. Scary in that we were trying to stay afloat on minimal unemployment, and when that ran out, we started dipping into the 401(k) to make ends meet. We had managed to find a way that allowed him to be a stay-at-home dad and be there for the kids, so I was the only salaried breadwinner. When the salary stopped coming in, we exhausted everything we had until we were about to declare bankruptcy. We got creative and did wedding/event videography.

4. The scariest moment lasted all day. From the minute I opened the bedroom door and saw him on the bed, I knew something was wrong. From the second I lunged to phone to dial 9-1-1 and got closer to his body, I knew something was wrong. Even after the paramedics arrived and heard them say there was still a chance, I knew something was wrong. When I was being interviewed by the police in my living room, and he was being transported to the hospital, I knew something was wrong. What I thought was the worst thing to happen was the worst thing to happen. He died. I was now suddenly a single parent that had to explain this to my kids. My entire life turned upside-down. I was unable to do my job, which required traveling. Everything changed that day.

After the dust settled, what coping mechanisms did you use?

1. I found peers that I could confide in, those that were going through the same thoughts and feelings and shame. I sought help and guidance from those who have been there.
2. I participated in a bereavement support group. I channeled my feelings into writing a journal (then later, a book), and I used

music as a form to express my feelings. It took several years for the dust to settle.

3. The only thing I could be was persistent and try to persevere. I was consistent in sending resumes and following up, and I had to believe there was light at the end of the tunnel.
4. Unlike the first time my husband died, this time, I didn't push people away. I took what help was offered, from hugs to meals to helping me walk through the list of things to do when someone dies. I had to focus on my kids' needs, so I let others help take some of that weight off my shoulders about what to make for dinner. I sought help from the community, and they delivered. They wanted to.

Can you share with us how you were eventually able to heal and “let go” of the negative aspects of that event?

1. I had to decide to live my life authentically and truthfully. I had to not let others define me or what it meant for me to be a gay man, but I defined myself. I had to stop caring what others thought of me while being true to myself. It wasn't easy, but each day was a choice to reconcile my past with my present and decide my future.
2. Healing from the loss of a loved one, a spouse, isn't easy. It's been over 25 years, and I still feel it, though not as intense in those first few years. Most of the healing comes with time, but there has to be a point during the grieving process that we decide to work towards healing. For me, it was about two years in with the support group and writing and music that I decided I was in a rut. I was doing the same thing I'd been doing, and I decided I needed a change. And it was a massive change as I quit my job and embarked on a new career as a consultant.
3. It actually took an outside force to help us heal and let go of 9 months of unemployment. I found a consulting project in New Orleans that fit what our consulting firm did to a “T.” I was

offered the job, but the market changed in those 9 months. As a consultant, I was responsible for my own travel and lodging, so I borrowed some money from my mother, packed up my car, and drove from California to New Orleans. I found an apartment that same day and moved in. I had two days before my first day of work.

4. It would take many years to “let go” of the negatives, but I can say I was helped by the experiences I had learned from the first time around. In late 2019, I decided to write my story. I felt I had all the elements I needed and the perspective of being grateful for the lessons I’d learned from both experiences.

Aside from letting go, what did you do to create an internal, emotional shift to feel better?

1. As I mentioned, I had to make conscious decisions each day, and eventually, I found someone that proved that I was right about my place in the world and that I loved and felt loved. In the process of letting go over some years, I was gifted with my first partner.
2. I was stuck. My support group helped me break into a path toward healing. Still, I also felt I was repeating patterns that needed to be disrupted. I had to pay close attention to my feelings as part of the recovery process and determined I needed a massive shake-up in my life to disrupt the status quo. Coincidental (if possible) timing led me to change my career and begin consulting globally. My direction shifted; I could then adjust what I needed to focus on.
3. So much of my worth as a father, husband, and consultant was tied to how well I could provide for my family, and when I couldn’t do so, I felt like a failure. We squeaked by, but not without some significant damage to our finances and credit scores. And when I did finally find work, it was 2,000 miles away from home. And I couldn’t afford to fly home every

weekend, so I felt guilty about that. I got past the guilt, but I had to keep reminding myself I was providing for my family.

4. When I started writing *Life After Losses*, it began as an exercise of catharsis. I knew I wanted to share the story of my recovery from the death of these two men that were instrumental in my life's journey. Still, it wasn't until I started getting deeper into the stories and emotions that I found that sense of gratefulness. As I wrote and pondered and paralleled my two love chapters, the pieces fell into place that I could recognize what I went through and be a better person for it.

Is there a particular person who you are grateful towards who helped get you to cope and heal? Can you share a story about that?

His name was Robert John Roders. He was 7 years my senior. I met him when I was 21, about 3 years after the accident that almost killed me. I would later learn that he actually witnessed that accident.

He was authentic, down-to-earth, and had an uncanny, natural ability to put people at ease. Because of our relationship, my family accepted that I could be happy as a gay man and that we weren't all that the media shared us to be. My sister, at that time a born-again evangelical, credits him for opening her heart; my mother referred to him as another of her sons.

Her name was Roni Peterson. She was the facilitator of our support group. She was a big personality with an even bigger heart and a smile that made me believe things could get better. After the first year in the group, she recognized that several of us were "ready" to "graduate" into a second group of more experienced grievers. I think the truth of the matter is that we had been in the group so long that when new people came in, we were all dragged backwards to OUR first times. She saw this and saw a way for us to focus on the next steps in healing, which was actually healing. We would have homework assignments to think about certain concepts or thoughts around how we could heal individually. It was insightful, and I feel instrumental in my being able to move forward.

His name was Robert Meek-LaVeck, and, as my husband, he helped keep me grounded. It wasn't an easy time for any of us, and our relationship suffered some

stress. Still, he reminded me that I was taking care of him and our children and that he could only maintain the household because of the sacrifices I was making.

I have to go back to both of my deceased husbands for providing me the opportunity to heal. I believe the lessons I learned from the first profoundly impacted my grieving process in the second. So I am grateful for that experience 25 years ago. I couldn't have said that 10 years ago, and I doubt I could have said that even three years ago. But I can now, and I'm grateful to my second husband, whose death required me to come to terms with the first and allowed me to put that first death into perspective. I fully needed both heartbreaking moments to happen so I could stop living as angry as I had been.

Were you able to eventually reframe the consequences and turn it into a positive situation? Can you explain how you did that?

- To combat the negative consequences of accepting myself, I live authentically and unapologetically. I decided that I wouldn't allow negative people to influence my life, and if they were unwilling to accept me as I saw me, then I didn't want them in my life.
- Eventually, I did reframe my husband's death into something that could be positive. But it would be over 20 years later before I could experience it, and a few more years after that to really reframe it. This is related to my Fourth event, the unexpected death of my second husband. With the benefit of hindsight and time, I came to be grateful for the lessons learned after losing my first husband. I could use those lessons to know what to expect the second time, and I used those lessons to share with our children about grieving. This became the theme of *Life After Losses*.
- I learned some financial lessons as a result of this. 1) don't rack up the credit card debt—it's not worth it; pay them off as soon as you can and don't carry a balance; 2) Don't put all your investments in one basket—the penalties I wound up paying from those 401(k) withdrawals were substantial; talk to a financial planner about financial concerns. Years later, I was

able to do so. I told my planner I wanted X dollars to be liquid and available to me penalty-free at any time. I also felt that we supported each other's roles in maintaining our household.

- I have been a listener of *The Daily Boost Podcast* for 15 years after getting my first iPod the Christmas prior. Podcasts were relatively new, and I was looking for something that would give me some daily motivation, and I found *Motivation to Move*. When I first started listening, host Scott Smith talked about his wife's passing recently. It reminded me of my first husband's death 7 years prior. Scott has a way of storytelling and getting the listener to the point of feeling motivated to move forward. While I was working in New Orleans, I'd worked with Scott as a personal coach. Ten years later, I decided to work with him again as I batted this idea around in my head to help coach others through their grief journey and whether it was frankly something I could do. He helped encourage me to follow the path to where I am now as an author/coach.

Writing the story was the easy part. Finding meaning in the story took some effort. Still, as I mentioned earlier, I am grateful for the gifts each loss gave me in understanding both.

What did you learn about yourself from this very difficult experience? Can you please explain with a story or example?

- I learned of personal strength and had to make a serious commitment to myself and my integrity. I mentioned earlier that I didn't want judgmental people in my life if they were unwilling to accept me. That was a difficult thing to do, especially since it included family. For a few years, my sister and I weren't close as a result. But in my uncompromising approach to sharing my life, as I mentioned, she came around and became less judgmental.
- Again, I learned of a deep personal strength I had no idea existed. I was forced to redefine who I was. I was no longer a husband, for one thing. I was now a widower. I was no longer a

caregiver, as the person I was giving care to was dead. I had to give up our dreams of what we planned to do together because he was gone. I had to learn to shop and cook for one without breaking into tears in the middle of a grocery aisle. Defining *my* “new normal” required me to take a leap and enact a massive change. It kick-started my redefinition process after I had been avoiding it for two years.

- I learned to just keep pushing. Keep going, and when it becomes impossible, push harder. I learned failure couldn't be an option. I was a parent now, a husband; I couldn't melt into my depression. I understood the lessons my mom learned and tried to teach us. I learned how to be a better father to my kids than my father was to me. All of these were so important as I uprooted myself and lived 2,000 miles away.
- I learned that, despite how strong I think I am as an individual, there are just some things I do not want to take on myself. It was reinforced that I can, and should, lean on others to help—and that help is there when I need it. For a self-sufficient person who has everything he has because of how he worked and how his mother instilled a work ethic in him, this is difficult to admit and difficult to do.

Fantastic. Here is the main question of our interview. Based on your experiences and knowledge, what advice would you give others to help them get through a difficult life challenge? What are your “5 Things You Need To Heal After a Dramatic Loss Or Life Change? Please share a story or example for each.

1. The first thing you need to know to heal is don't do it alone. You will make it so much harder to recover from your losses if you push people and help away. I pushed all our friends away after my first husband died. It was too painful to see them without him around. I learned that when you're grieving, the people around you also lost someone they cared about and are grieving, too. When they offer to help, take them up on it. It

gives them the feeling they're doing something useful, and it takes the mundane off your plate so you can focus on yourself.

2. While focusing on yourself, don't self-medicate with drugs or alcohol. If you are depressed from your loss (and why wouldn't you be?), seek help. I am not a professional counselor; I'm just someone who lived through being widowed twice. The first time, I spent the first two years or so deep in the bottle. I didn't want to feel anything but numb, and that's what I accomplished. That was not an option when I became a single parent, so I sought help to cope with my situational depression. There can be no stigma associated with seeking mental health care when you need it.
3. Time is the great equalizer. It's a friend, it's an enemy, but it's needed. We all need time to mourn our losses and need to take that time. How much time? As much as you need. There is no timeline to healing; there is no comparing your journey to another's. Time gives you a perspective from the event; it allows you to see progress (even incremental). Time lessens the sting. The first anniversary of my first husband's death was more painful than the 20th. I still missed him, I still felt the "what if" question, but I didn't need all day to cry.
4. Know that mourning a loss is not a linear process. You don't go from Denial to Anger to Bargaining to Depression to Acceptance and call it a day. You will bounce back and forth between them throughout each loss and sometimes occupy both simultaneously. "I can't believe this is happening to me. He's dead! I'm so angry at ____!" There's the truth. Denial (I can't believe this is happening), acceptance (he's dead), and anger (I'm so angry at ____). Understand that the feelings you feel when you feel them are absolutely valid. In 2014, I took the kids to Family Week after my second husband died. We had planned to do this anyway, but it was just me this time. I remember one night, we were all overly emotional, missing him, and I told the kids I was angry at him for dying. And angry they had to go through this. They didn't realize you could miss

someone so much and still be angry at them, and their feelings confused them. I showed them that it was not only okay, but it was absolutely normal.

5. Anticipate triggers. They will always be there, whether it's a date, a place, finding something tucked in a drawer. When you spend the time thinking about how you want to feel ahead of time, the intensity of the actual event tends to be less. I remember when the kids and I went through my husband's clothes. I went in knowing there were some pieces we wouldn't be ready to part with, and I'd had an idea of having a quilt created using his old shirts. As I opened each drawer or took a handful of hangars out of the closet, we stopped to make a decision: Keep, Quilt, or Donate. I told them before we started that they could make whatever decision they wanted and if they saw something that sparked a memory, that we should stop to talk about it.

You are a person of great influence. If you could inspire a movement that would bring the most amount of good to the most amount of people, what would that be?

I firmly believe there is more that unites us than divides us. We all want mostly the same things: to live in peace, without fear; to provide for our families; to give opportunities to our children we didn't have. We may differ on how to get there, but I believe our focus on the differences is misplaced. It needs to be on the end goal. As I've communicated with hundreds of widows and widowers over the years, we all go through the same when we lose someone we love. Sydney J. Harris is quoted as saying, "Never take life seriously. Nobody gets out alive anyway." We need to enjoy each other while we still can.

We are very blessed that some very prominent names in Business, VC funding, Sports, and Entertainment read this column. Is there a person in the world, or in the US with whom you would love to have a private breakfast or lunch with, and why? He or she might just see this if we tag them. 😊

After my first husband died, I read everything I could on life, death, mourning, grief, and spirituality, trying to make sense of it all. Several books I read were by Neale Donald Walsch, author of the *Conversations With God* series. Those books were profound and impactful to me when I struggled with believing in a higher power that would take a good person from the world. I would simply want to say, "Thank you for providing me some comfort in that time."

I'd also love to thank Garth Brooks for giving us "*The Dance*." That song also helped me heal.

How can our readers further follow your work online?

I can be found at <https://www.jlaveck.com>, where readers can find information about me, my book *Life After Losses*, and the supplemental blog.

Thank you so much for sharing these important insights. We wish you continued success and good health!

Thank you again for asking me to participate!

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Pirie Jones Grossman

Pirie Jones Grossman is a certified Life Coach, TedX Speaker, writer and producer of wellness festivals around the country. She has shared the stage with speakers such as Deepak Chopra, Kris Carr, and Jill Bolte Taylor. She leads women's empowerment workshops, including teenage girls, focusing on self esteem, sleep disorders, depression and brain health.

She's a former TV host for E! Entertainment Television, Fox Television, NBC, CBS and ABC. She was Co-Chair for the Special Olympics International World Winter Games in Idaho and spoke at the UN on behalf of Special Olympics.

She is the founder of the "Love is Louder" Brain Health Summit with Suicide survivor, Kevin Hines, focusing on teenage depression and suicide. She also gave a TedX talk about, "How To Heal A

Community from Suicide.”

Pirie has her Masters in Spiritual Psychology from the University of Santa Monica, California. She is a Sun Valley Wellness Institute Board member. She lives in Sun Valley, Idaho with her two teenagers where she has a private Soul Centered Living coaching practice.

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by Pirie Jones Grossman