

## A Test of Endurance

### Life after loss takes time

OF ALL THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE in working through grief, none is more demanding than the endurance it requires. It begins with 365 days of "the first time without," but it doesn't end there.

If your spouse or child has died, you can't bear to think recovering from that loss is going to take as long as three years. But rarely is it less and often it is much longer.

No newly divorced person wants to think in terms of two or more years before life feels as if it is back on an even keel. It takes all of that time to recover from a lost love if you work hard at the task.

It's tempting for both widowed and divorced persons to try to fill the gap of loneliness by getting involved with another person as soon as possible. You need to know that it often does not result in more happiness, but greater sadness. You just aren't ready for the emotional stress and may not make wise choices. If filling the empty places becomes a substitute for working through your grief, it can also become a detriment to your physical health.

The length of your grief after any major loss will be considerably longer than you expect. It takes a long time to work

through the various phases of recovery. To endure the time it takes you must believe the rewards are worth the effort. Trying to rush the process is an exercise in futility—and can lengthen the time required for you to recover your sense of balance.

### Grief Is Heavy

Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of people working through grief. Grief is heavy. Carrying its weight is tiring. People tell me they are constantly exhausted in the first three to six months after a death or divorce.

It isn't that grief beats on you so much as it *leans* on you. In the early months, you feel its weight night and day without relief. It seems to wear you down by persistence.

When Dick lost a business partner, he spent a solid week in bed, too weary to bathe or get dressed. If you are so tired after a major loss that everything you do is an effort, you are reacting in a normal way. It's a heavy load and it takes an incredible amount of endurance to carry it.

The stress of carrying the load of your grief may result in feelings of depression. You may have little interest in eating regularly or paying attention to the nutritional balance of your meals. If you are like most people, you will be dehydrated and you will not get an adequate amount of exercise. You may have trouble sleeping or staying awake.



Fatigue is a normal part of grief recovery. You may want to add this statement to the growing list of helpful reminders you post around your house:

*Grief is heavy. To feel tired is normal. My fatigue will not last forever. I will endure until I win.*

*People tell me they are constantly exhausted in the first three to six months after a death or divorce.*

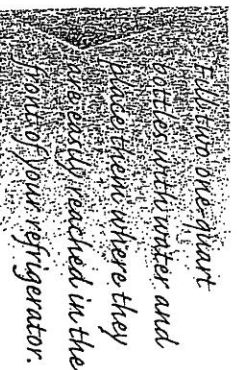
Grief recovery is hard work that requires a maximum of stamina and patience from you. Whatever else you may call your movement through grief, you will surely label it an endurance contest of the first order.

### Your Physical Health

Health problems are much more likely to develop after a major loss. The classic study done by Erich Lindemann in 1944 indicates that one's risk of developing coronary artery disease becomes 250 percent higher after the death of a spouse. Risks for developing cancer, high blood pressure, arthritis, diabetes, thyroid disease and skin disease are similarly high for those who have suffered the loss of a spouse.

Subsequent studies, including those of Dr. Glen Davidson at Southern Illinois University, indicate an increased risk for migraine headaches, chronic depression, low-back pain and blood-chemistry disorders. Widows and widowers are also at increased risk for developing alcohol and drug dependency.

The good news is, you do not have to become a victim of health problems. Your response to the grief that follows a major loss is in your control. Take a look at the box on pages 106 to 107 for five helpful ways you can stay strong in the face of grief.



**Developing Grief Fitness**

Working through grief is a little like working out for physical fitness. Those who lift weights cannot start with the maximum weight they hope to lift. Those who jog or walk can't begin with a maximum distance. They have to work up to these goals a little at a time. In the same way, you don't start out handling grief in the way you will later. You grow into grief fitness a little at a time. It doesn't come easily, but it is the way to regain your balance in life after a major loss.

Over and over you will need to tell yourself, "I will not always feel as I do now." You will need patience with others and with yourself. You will need to remember that sometimes you will feel worse before you begin to feel better.

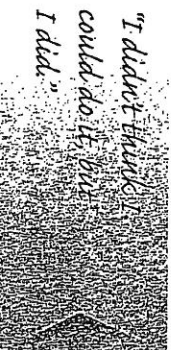
It isn't uncommon during the first year or two to have times when you think the work is finished. And then something happens to plunge you back into the depths of anguish.

The first year after a death or any major loss is dominated by constant reminders. Every day is another *first time without* experience. The more significant the day, the more painful the experience. Birthdays, anniversaries,



special family days, religious holidays and typical vacation dates are among those that are frequently the most painful.

Take things one day at a time, even one experience at a time. It may come down to enduring one more night of loneliness or one more meal across from an empty chair. It helps to know the first year after a major loss is not going to be one of the best years in your life. But it doesn't have to be the worst year, either. After all, it has a purpose and a direction. You can come to the end of the year and know you have made a significant accomplishment just because you survived.



Passing the anniversary date of a major loss can be like a graduation day. People say to me, "I didn't think I could do it, but I did." I see a new sparkle in their eyes. They have endured the worst and survived. You, too, can do that.

### The Lonely Year

The second year of grief calls for more patience with yourself than with anyone else. After getting through the first year, you may think life will return to normal. It doesn't. Many betrayed people call the second year of grief their *lonely year*. They say that surviving the first year proves you will make it. The second year proves how lonely it can be to make it without the one you lost.

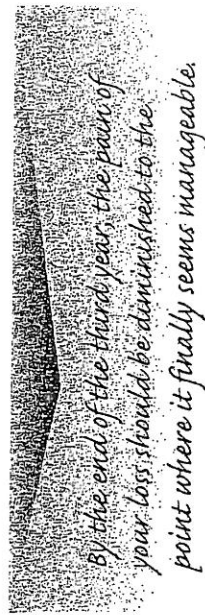
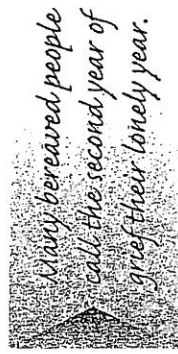
It may seem as if you are starting all over again. You aren't. This is a good time to join a grief support group or to rejoin if you dropped out.

Once the second-year crisis is past, you will be ready to start getting on with the reorganization of your life after loss. This doesn't mean there is no more grieving to do. It means you will have developed sufficient skills to handle your grief.

In time and with hard work, the good days will begin to outnumber the bad ones.

By the end of the third year, the pain of your loss should be diminished to the point where it finally seems manageable.

Perhaps the most important growth that will come to you during grief recovery is the sense of confidence and pride that emerges. You have endured the very worst of all experiences and finished on top. You are a different person, a stronger person and a better person than when you started.



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