

ENDORSEMENTS

“A needed friend on an unwanted, but necessary, journey after grief.”

MARY DEMUTH

“Fran tackled a tough topic with grace and wisdom. If our sorrows remain unattended, those of us left behind will wither and die with our loved ones.”

RITA A. SCHULTE, LPC

“Fran normalizes numerous aspects of the grief process and provides practical tips for those struggling to adapt to life without their loved one. Fran unashamedly turns her readers to the ultimate hope, strength, and comfort which she herself found.”

BETH GREGORY

“Be blessed, Fran. This book will bring healing to many.”

COLLETA KOPOKA

WIDOWED

WHEN DEATH SUCKS THE LIFE OUT OF YOU

FRAN GEIGER JOSLIN



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Widowed: When Death Sucks the Life out of You
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INTRODUCTION

Do you feel alone?
Do you wonder if you will make it?

Do you feel no one wants to listen or seems to care that you've practically lost your mind in the throes of grief?

I hope this book provides a place of relief instead of pain. I hope you find peace and camaraderie instead of isolation and aloneness. Allow yourself the luxury of crying your way through, if that's what it takes.

Normal, normal, normal! If you get nothing else from this book, please understand your feelings qualify as completely normal.

I wrote *Widowed: When Death Sucks the Life out of You* to encourage you and to address the concerns I suffered but to which I found few answers.

Keep in mind each chapter stands alone. Widows find it difficult to focus. I purposely wrote each chapter to allow for an easy read as well as to aid in finding

particular needed topics. Also, the word “widow” throughout the book includes both widows and widowers.

My main goals: to validate your feelings and give you hope.

Note to pastors, counselors, family, and friends of the bereaved (Encouragers):

Widowhood reigns as one of the highest forms of grief. If you find yourself offended by strong statements within this book, please remember widows experience intense emotions. More than anything, they need permission to express—and find validation for—these deep feelings. I trust you will gain increased depth of understanding by hearing their pain through my words.

To read more from Fran on the topic of widowhood, the unabridged version of *Widowed: When Death Sucks the Life Out of You* may be purchased at www.Amazon.com.

MY STORY

At age 27, I married my first love—Brian Geiger. The most amazing day of my life! I couldn't imagine anything better. Or happier. "I get to spend the rest of my life with this man," I gloated.

Ten years and three children later, everything changed. "It's a very impressive mass," the nurse foolishly jested. My world came to a screeching halt. Suddenly, brain surgery and cancer treatment permeated our everyday lives.

We lived moment to moment, month to month, year to year, always praying for a miracle. Survival mode dictated daily life, and I wondered how my kids would survive our new chaotic existence. By God's grace we persevered, though at times I didn't think we would make it.

I lost Brian piece by piece over a period of almost nine years, and grieved every loss. He kept his sense of humor throughout, which gave me strength to keep going. I wondered how I would cope once he went to heaven and could no longer bring laughter to our home.

By our nineteenth wedding anniversary, Brian's cancer no longer responded to treatment. We grew weary and hopeless. I begged the Lord for twenty years with Brian. Just one more year.

Our marriage ended at nineteen. Brian met the Lord in July, and so began the rest of my life—*without* him.

How to explain the loss of your other half? Impossible! Many describe it as the amputation of a limb. Half of you, really. The one who knows you better than anyone else in the world.

I still feel the pain of loss. I often cry when a new friend tells me she's a widow. My heart grieves for the widowed because our spouse's death sucks the life out of us.

Part One

WHEN DEATH STRIKES

THE BIG “W”

In one traumatic moment, the title “widow” imposes itself on us when death steals our love. It throws us into a pit of darkness, sadness, loneliness, and confusion. And, just like that, stripped of our personal privacy, we lay bare for the world to watch.

Word of tragedy spreads quickly. It seemed everyone I knew, as well as everyone *they* knew, learned of my new widowed status. When the kids and I walked into church or school—or even the market—eyes followed us. I felt as if I walked around with a big “W” emblazoned across my chest.

I withdrew from the public eye as much as possible. I attended church regularly for the sake of my children but, although I enjoyed relationships there, I found it difficult to constantly “perform.”

I felt as if I’d lost my privacy at home as well. Out of kindness and compassion, people wanted to help. I imagine if no one offered, my feelings might’ve been

hurt. But I just couldn't deal with all the well-wishers who offered assistance.

I wanted to grieve in private. I needed lots of alone time to cry. I didn't want people showing up unannounced to witness my messy grief. I also needed to figure out how to cope with my new roles of single parent and head of household.

These jumbled emotions led me to use the platform of personal loss as an opportunity to teach others how to minister to the suffering. I encourage you to do the same.

Honestly answer how you're coping when others ask, even if you cry. Find shortcut answers. For example, "I'm doing well, considering." Sadly, most really don't want the details. If they want more, they will ask questions.

Tell your closest friends how they can pray for you. If they say something hurtful, gently explain how their words hurt. Openly share your grief for two reasons:

1. People need to know how to understand and encourage those who hurt.
2. People need to prepare should they one day walk your path.

What a blessing to share with others how God meets us even in our despair.

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:7–9

Encouragers: Especially early on, widows may feel watched and unprepared to face all eyes on them in public where everyone else appears happy. Give them permission to face things as they feel ready.

ABSENT FROM THE BODY

I never gave much thought to the body until I faced widowhood, but suddenly I didn't know how to function without Brian's body. I could no longer snuggle up to him at night, cry in his arms, ask for his opinions, or simply receive a smile from him. Brian's body carried those beautiful eyes that made me melt every time he looked at me. He lit up a room with laughter. And now, the very thing that literally embodied him disappeared from my life.

In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul says he would rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord. What a wonderful blessing for believers who die! As Paul states, absence from this earthly body means instant and glorious presence with the Lord. Where does that leave widows, though? We are ripped from the presence of that body and forced to dispose of it because it no longer holds life.

It would be unnatural not to grieve the loss of the body. It held all that we loved about our spouse—

including all those qualities we didn't love so much. The absence of the body feels like more than we can bear. We were, after all, "one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

The death of a spouse, therefore, mimics an amputation of half of us. Nothing can fill the gaping hole our loved one's body should fill. People who lose a limb to amputation eventually learn to function without that limb, but their lives forever change. Losing a spouse works the same way.

Sometime after Brian's death, I read a book that encouraged me to cling to the hope that, although never the same, life could be good again.¹ Eventually we learn to create a good, enjoyable life outside of our grief, but it takes time and a great amount of effort.

Encouragers: Resist the temptation to remind the widow her spouse lives "in a better place." While she understands that, it doesn't take away her pain. Give her permission to feel her pain and time to adjust to life without her other half.

GRIEF

The loss of a loved one causes grief. Grief involves many emotions as well as physical responses, such as pain, nausea, and even confusion. Everyone experiences and expresses grief differently, so take heart. No matter where you find yourself, know this: *You are normal.*

What Grief Looks Like

Initially, we often experience shock or disbelief, which usually includes some form of crying, screaming, or collapsing. Normal grief can involve just about every emotion and physical response imaginable. Grief completely drains our emotions, energy, and health. This may help explain the reason grief takes a lot of time and a lot of energy.

Grief equals pain. Most people avoid pain in general and therefore find it tempting to run from the process of grief. Some throw themselves into work or into another relationship to escape the pain. But trying to skip grief only causes more trouble in the long run.

Important Components of Grief

Talking is a necessary element to the grief journey. Talk about your love, feelings, fears, and regrets, as well as any other pain you carry. Some find talking difficult. Find safe people who will listen without judgment and share in your pain. Try not to overwhelm any one or two people, however. Some may tire of your sadness.

Crying comes easily for some but not for others. Shedding tears expresses sorrow and helps relieve feelings of loss. It takes lots of tears on many occasions, but healthy grief allows weeping. Many say they can't shed any more tears, and this may happen to you.

My friend Francine won't let herself cry. She thinks she needs to hold herself together and march on. Eventually, her pain will overflow and she will no longer be able to hide it. If you find it difficult to shed tears, try scheduling your grief. Purposely remember special times with your spouse, look at pictures, watch a sappy movie, or whatever helps draw your emotion to the surface. Most of us cry daily and then slowly time between tears stretches out, whether we are simply "cried out" or beginning to adjust.

Weariness could pass as a synonym for the word “grief.” Grief wore me out. Everything felt overwhelming and just plain exhausting! But every morning I somehow got up and did life all over again. For that reason alone, I began to see that God’s mercies really are new every morning.

Many widows experience something called **PTSD** (post-traumatic stress disorder). When we suffer traumatic events, our bodies and minds react with serious stress. I found myself panicking over normally simple responsibilities.

I couldn’t commit to small tasks or projects. I feared I couldn’t come through. I even panicked at the thought of the kids bringing their friends to my house. I finally noticed some recovery from PTSD once I took on a full-time job, forced myself to make commitments, and engaged in events I previously avoided.

Because of the Lord’s great love, we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23

Encouragers: Grief exhausts, depresses, and leaves widows feeling completely alone. Your availability as a listener will deeply encourage them. Make yourself available without pressuring them, and try hard to understand without offering suggestions.

GRIEF DIFFERENCES

People grieve differently. While it may seem a simple statement, maneuvering the maze of needs and emotions proves a difficult challenge. After all, we've lost our love. The way we grieve, how much we grieve, and how long we grieve depends on many things:

- The relationship we shared with our love.
- Our individual personality.
- The circumstances of his/her death.
- And so much more.

Others who grieve for the same person will likely express their pain in completely different ways. A young child will grieve differently than a teen or an adult child because of the age difference as well as their relationship to the deceased.

Remember, all grief is normal. One person may cry incessantly while another won't cry at all. One may express anger, and another withdraw completely. Some

sleep too much. Others can't sleep at all. Many widows need to talk, but some don't want to face the subject. Some cope by pretending everything remains the same.

At times, I longed for bedtime when I could just crash and, although I had trouble sleeping, no pressing matters required my attention. The silence of the night presented not only a reprieve from daily responsibilities but also the reality of complete and utter loneliness. During these moments, I cried out to the Almighty God for strength to make it just one more day.

My mom says when we were little and she felt completely overwhelmed, she would tell herself she could make it ten minutes. At the end of those ten minutes, she told herself she could make it another ten minutes. Sometimes that's the best we can do.

Encouragers: Offer loving support even if the expressed grief makes no sense to you. Widows often make strong statements because they feel intense emotions.

THE FIRST YEAR

The first year seems like a blur. Emotions fly all over the place. Some days we manage to feel perfectly normal, and other days we can hardly get out of bed. Initially, it may seem like our spouse went on an extended trip. We miss him, but it takes a while for reality to sink in.

Conflicting Emotions

Two months after his wife died, Daudi told me he doesn't cry at all some days, which leaves him feeling guilty. Other days he can hardly stop crying and he feels guilty again. Some days he visits his granddaughter and enjoys himself without sensing his enormous loss. Other days he can barely function. In one conversation with him, I heard just about every emotion possible. His thoughts and feelings collided with one another and he couldn't sort them out.

Knowing his cancer would take his life, Ray prayed his wife Candice would remarry after his death.

Six months after he died, Candice wept while reminiscing about her husband. In the same conversation, she gushed over another man she met who impressed her. Although her grief remained too raw to consider remarriage, she longed for the answer to her husband's prayer and her emotions betrayed her.

Most people don't recommend remarriage within the first two years after a death. In this confused state of mind, a person could easily make an unwise choice.

Survival

We pretty much live in survival mode, especially the first year after the death of our spouse. Every moment we hang on, feverishly trying to survive the pain, the work, or the monotony. In the middle of the emotional ups and downs, we cook, manage single parenting, deal with a leaky roof, or listen to the silence of our home. It all feels overwhelming.

Fog

Many Americans describe a feeling of numbness after becoming a widow. I prefer to call this feeling a fog.

Personally, I resented the word “numb.” Although some people feel numb, I felt enormous pain—physical pain, as well as emotional pain.

A fog-like state descends upon us during the first months and shields us from experiencing the full force of pain. In this fog, life must go on even though we struggle to function normally and wish the world would stop. In one sense, my life came to a screeching halt, and yet it required me to keep going.

Blanketed in a fog, I had to address the business of closing out Brian’s life. I couldn’t think straight. I could hardly sleep and felt constant nausea and exhaustion. When my body wanted to collapse, I forced myself to keep going for the sake of my children. I wanted to hide, but couldn’t.

Friends and loved ones tend to offer grace freely while we stumble about in a fog-like state. Unfortunately, the average person willingly extends this grace for only about a year.

I counted down the months to the end of the first year, thinking, “If I can just get through the first year, I might make it,” but this heavy weight of dense fog constantly loomed, threatening to engulf me.

I didn't anticipate the vulture that swooped in as year two began. The fog lifted, and reality slapped me in the face. I managed to survive a year without Brian, but suddenly I faced the task of surviving the *rest of my life* without him. At this same time, others expected me to "move on." I could barely move at all, though, for the reality of Brian's death sucked the life completely out of me.

Because of the Lord's great love, we are not
consumed, for his compassions never fail.

Lamentations 3:22

Encouragers: Widows need your listening ear, possibly to the same stories repeatedly. Offer to help with tasks, but always give them an opportunity to opt out if they can't face it right now. While they need your help, they may not be able to muster the strength to accept. Don't force it.

Part Two

WHEN DEATH SUCKS THE
LIFE OUT OF YOU

1

REALITIES

FAMILIAR BECOMES UNFAMILIAR

Nothing seems normal in this land of widowhood. Literally everything changes.

One day my friend Josh asked how I was doing. When the tears welled up and he clearly saw my emotion, he asked what made my life hard. I paused to think, but no words came to adequately express my pain. I summed it up in one huge understatement: “*Everything!*”

My in-laws hosted a typical family dinner, but it didn't play out as typical. I went to sit in my normal spot by Brian, but he wouldn't attend this dinner. Where should I sit? A moment of inexpressible grief crushed me over the “simple” matter of where to sit. Sitting in the familiar spot seemed unbearably lonely. I chose, instead, to sit across the table in what felt like a completely unfamiliar spot.

What typically qualified as usual conversation suddenly didn't feel familiar either. The reality devastated

me. I no longer belonged to a two-person team. I now existed as a fractured one.

Even the market became a stranger overnight. More than once I reached to grab food Brian liked, but he no longer needed it. Every item I once bought for him now turned on me as if an enemy, sneering harsh reminders of my loss.

Tasks your spouse managed without much thought now sit incomplete. After Ann died, Howard tried to follow a recipe for potato soup. Just following a recipe conquered him. He eventually created his own recipes using amounts that made sense to him.

Women and men alike share the question: How much do I lean on friends of the opposite sex? It is uncomfortable and unwise to talk to someone else's spouse about needs. Yet, unexpectedly we need the help of someone else's spouse to give cooking advice or fix a leaky roof. Exercise caution in this area.

Accept help from others for a while, if you can handle it. If it works for you, let people bring meals or clean, but manage the assistance on your terms. Feel free to accept or reject any offer of help based on your

needs. A new widow named Grace comfortably left her door unlocked while her friends came and went in their efforts to help. It didn't bother her at all.

Me? I needed privacy. My kids tired of our tumultuous and chaotic life. They grew weary of eating other people's food. Well-wishers begged us to let them help. But after a time, we simply wanted solitude. I couldn't meet people at the door to receive meals or help of any sort. I didn't want to make conversation or answer questions. I needed to hide. I couldn't handle people showing up at my house, especially unannounced. Normally a social person, I needed to withdraw.

No answers or solutions exist for the dilemma of the unfamiliar other than to hang in there. We must simply hang on, keep trudging, and figure it out over time. Eventually, the unfamiliar becomes a new familiar. Although everything in life turns completely upside down, Jesus remains the same. We can, at least, hold on to that promise.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today,
and forever.

Hebrews 13:8

Encouragers: Pray for your widowed friends. Ask God to give them grace to manage the many changes in their daily lives. Offer to help where you can without overstepping your bounds, especially with a widow of the opposite sex.

LOSSES

The death of a loved one creates numerous losses. We have been deprived not only of the person we love but all that he or she represented to us.

Relationships

When death steals our mate, it severs our relationship with him, slicing off every part of that relationship. This amputation leaves us alone to complete the rest of our lives without our partner's love, encouragement, help, support, criticism (helpful or not), and on it goes.

Brian was my very best friend. I love and appreciate many close friends, but suddenly the one person to whom I first turned no longer existed, and I felt completely alone.

With the loss of our love, we also lose all the plans, dreams, and expectations for our future together and as a family. Regardless of the decisions we make, our future has forever changed.

Brian made it his goal to walk his daughter down the aisle at her wedding (an American tradition). He died before her eleventh birthday. He can no longer fill the pictures in her dreams of her dad walking her down the aisle on the day she pledges herself to the love of her life. Whether we like it or not, grief obligates us to accept the changes our dreams must take.

Personal Changes

Death changes us. We suddenly exist as one person missing a leg yet trying to walk normally. “You aren’t the same mom you used to be!” my daughter snapped at me one day. How intensely insightful. I limped along, trying to keep up, striving to meet the needs of my kids, but I felt chopped in half. Brian’s death changed me and it affected everyone around me.

Touch

We see couples who don’t appreciate one another and our hearts ache. We see couples adoring each other and our hearts ache. How we miss being touched, but not just by anyone. We miss the touch of the one from

whom we will never again receive touch, and our hearts scream out in pain.

“I thought I would never get to have sex again,” Ezekiel admitted. With the loss of our spouse also comes the loss of the most intimate touch: our sexual relationship.

Finances

Our financial situation typically changes because of our loss. When Esta's husband died, her in-laws took everything she owned, including her home. Although she could have taken them to court, she couldn't afford the time or the money it required. Her parents graciously took her in, along with her five children, but with financial strain.

Marital Status

To some degree, our marital status defines us. In one moment, we are stripped of the title “Married.” By no choice of our own, the title “Widowed” forces itself upon us. How strange it sounds to our ears, and how deeply it affects our emotions.

Parenting

If children still live at home, the widow immediately becomes a single parent. Single parenting, especially to grieving children, represents one of the most difficult tasks in the world.

The moment we become a single parent, our children become partial orphans. My children lost one parent to death and the other parent to grief. The death of one family member changed our entire unit. The loss of a parent robs children of their sense of safety. Their entire world turns upside down just as ours does. Somehow, we must learn to comfort them in our sadness.

At every turn, we come face-to-face with more loss, and we grieve each one. No wonder grief feels so terribly overwhelming!

He will wipe every tear from their eyes.
There will be no more death or mourning
or crying or pain, for the old order of
things has passed away.

Revelation 21:4

Encouragers: Give your widowed friend permission to feel all the losses. Try to imagine what that might feel like to him. Ask him to describe how it feels.

PRAYER

During the fight for Brian's life, George once asked about Brian and quickly stopped himself. He rephrased the question. "No. How are *you* doing?"

I honestly shared how some days I survived by God's grace alone. George vowed to pray for me every day that week. I reminded myself daily of his pledge. The knowledge alone of someone else in prayer on my behalf gave me strength to keep trudging. Even now, years later, George continues to pray for me as well as for my new family.

Gloria, a beautiful bent-over elderly lady, still asks specific questions about our ministry and family. She ministers to me on a regular basis through her interest, compassion, and commitment to prayer.

These friends may not typify the "norm," but we desperately need people in our lives committed to praying us through. I know for sure I've progressed this far because of those who pray for me regularly.

Feel free to ask a few people to pray specifically and regularly for you. It will greatly encourage you as you take each new step.

Encouragers: Please pray for your widowed friends and regularly remind them of your prayers. When I left church, I often found the windshield wipers on my car awry. It annoyed me until a friend admitted he stood them up to remind me of his prayers on my behalf.

2

SIDE EFFECTS

FOCUS

In the months after Brian's death, I couldn't focus on anything. I tried to read but forgot what I just read. I tried praying but couldn't get through more than one or two sentences. I gave up.

Although friends and family may willingly help handle certain kinds of business and other projects, eventually the tasks fall back on us to complete even when we find it difficult to concentrate.

No one can really tell us how to deal with this. We simply must stumble our way through while clinging to the Lord for strength. A few suggestions may help keep your sanity:

- Be patient with yourself.
- Allow yourself bad days.
- Write things down.
- Put better days to good use.
- Grit your teeth, pray, take a deep breath, and

just do it.

- Focus where you can when you can.
- Reward yourself for accomplishing tough tasks.
- Allow yourself time to cry and then pick yourself up and get something—anything—done.
- Put one foot in front of the other and drag yourself to important events.

Encouragers: Give your widowed friend permission to struggle. Show her the list above and offer to help if you can.

SLEEP

Even months after Brian's death, I stayed up way too late hoping to avoid the pain associated with my half-empty bed. I hoped the later I collapsed into it, the easier sleep might come. When I finally gave in to the night, I threw myself lengthwise across the bed to fill the emptiness.

While grief and depression cause some to sleep too much, I slept too little. Like many widows and others suffering grief, I found it impossible to achieve a healthy sleep pattern.

Some nights my kids came into my room crying, unable to sleep themselves. They missed their dad, and the pressures of school compounded their angst. At times, we had to forego homework and cry. Other times they fell asleep in my bed with schoolwork on their laps.

Our bodies crave sleep. They scream at us when we get too little of it. Doctors can sometimes help us with medication, but watch for long-term side effects.

Natural remedies also exist. Check with your doctor before trying any, however.

I know many widows who leave music or a TV on to fill the night. Exercise helps as well.

Encouragers: Resist the temptation to offer solutions unless you've found something particularly helpful. Lack of sleep after loss isn't always cured with what may seem simple to us. Listen to your friend's frustration and give grace.

FORGETTING

At some point we begin to forget. One day I tried to remember what Brian wore to bed at night. The clothes didn't really matter, but the fact that I forgot upset me greatly.

Interestingly, we feel guilty when we forget even small, unimportant things. We would probably forget certain things even if they still lived. So, what makes their death any different? Maybe because we don't *want* to forget. We cling to memories because that's all we have left.

We need to forgive ourselves for our humanity and our inability to remember everything. As the years pass, Brian no longer graces my daily presence, and I will forget little things. I need to remind myself that Brian stands in the presence of Jesus now. He doesn't really care if I remember what he wore to bed.

Children also grieve forgotten memories. My daughter cried because she couldn't remember what

her dad looked like. We brought out pictures, but she wanted to remember his laugh, what it felt like to be swooped up in his arms, and what kind of advice he would give. I could tell her what he might have said, but nothing replaces his presence. I asked the kids one day what they missed most about their dad. Nikki profoundly summed it up: “Him.”

Some things fit the category of healthy memory loss, especially if we remarry. I don’t want to forget Brian or the memories and years we shared. When I remarried, however, my husband Howard and I both specifically chose *not* to dwell on memories of our sex lives with our first spouse. In this instance, we needed to create our own, new memories. This doesn’t mean we never remember sex with our first spouse, but we choose to focus on the intimacy within our current marriage.

Overall, we need to balance our memories. Remember the good times. Forgive the bad. Realize some memories will disappear, and others will etch themselves forever in our minds. Some should not monopolize our thoughts. Hopefully somewhere along the line, we find balance.

Encouragers: You may not know the answer to what your friend forgets, but you can share stories you remember about her spouse. We love hearing other people's stories and experiences with our spouse because we miss those we lost.

TRUST

“**W**hom can you trust?” Kabula asked me. That’s a very good question, and a difficult one to answer. Some of us can’t trust family. Some can. Usually certain family members deserve our trust, while others don’t. Often a death in the family causes relationship twists, and we realize—somewhat unexpectedly—that circumstances change when we most need them to stay the same.

This scenario plays out in more stories than I can count. Sometimes it’s about money. Sometimes differences in needs or expressions of grief bring about tension. Whatever the story, it hurts.

Unfortunately, we can’t manipulate the minds of those who seem to turn on us. We can, however, set boundaries to prevent more pain and hurt. We must stand up for our own needs but in a kind manner.

Sadly, the friend situation models that of families. When death occurs, friendships adjust, and we can’t always trust the same people we trusted in the past.

Kabula can't seem to rely on anyone. Her pain runs so deep her friends can't comprehend her needs. Sadly, they ignore her. She feels completely alone, and her feelings of aloneness intensify her depression. On the brink of suicide, she reached out to me for help. She literally didn't know whom to trust.

Kabula needs new friends, but she lacks the strength to search. Although I know she can trust me, I doubt she fully believes it.

A lot of people feel they can't even trust God. They think he let them down. Many wonder how a good God could let someone die when others desperately need that person. I understand the confusion. It certainly feels that way at times.

If we can't trust God, whom *can* we trust? When good things happen in America we tend to feel we don't need God or we talk about how amazing he is. When bad things happen to other people, we tell them to "just trust God." But when bad things happen to us, we often assume he abandoned us.

If we believe in a good God during good times, why would our beliefs change in bad times? I don't

understand everything God does or everything he allows, but I consider him my only hope. If I didn't have God to hang on to, I would find myself in a much darker place. Scripture addresses my fears and gives me courage to keep going, even one more day.

Praise be to the Lord, for he has *heard* my cry for *mercy*. The *Lord* is my *strength* and my *shield*. My heart *trusts* in him and *I am healed*.

Psalm 28:6–7, emphasis mine

Encouragers: Prove to your friend that she can trust you by walking this path with her—on her terms.

3

EMOTIONS

ANGER

I raged with anger after Brian died. I wanted to believe I expressed “righteous anger,” of course. I spent a lot of time thinking and praying about my wrath, wondering where the line crossed from righteous anger to sin.

Anger naturally accompanies grief. Just the fact that we feel mad can make us enraged. Many of us resent the deceased for leaving even if we know they didn’t choose to die.

Fury toward God commonly occurs as well as exasperation toward anyone who treats us poorly. Those who faced a difficult marriage or “unfinished business” with their spouse also feel frustration that closure didn’t occur. In the event of a suicide, even if mental illness exists, intense resentment can consume us.

Here’s what the Bible says about anger:

1. God's character: slow to anger

If I want to follow him, I should also want to emulate his qualities: he's compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love.

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness. (Ex. 34:6)

2. God's character: just

We should let God deal with difficult people. I love the following verse, not because I want to see anyone hurt, but because of God's seriousness about protecting widows and orphans. He will deal with those who push us to cry out to him.

Do not take advantage of a widow *or* an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I *will* certainly *hear* their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless. (Ex. 22:22–24, emphasis mine)

3. Be angry; do not sin

Scripture clearly states that anger is not inherently wrong. Go ahead—get angry! The challenge? Voicing that anger without sinning. We must hold ourselves accountable to a standard of godliness because “anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (James 1:20).

In your anger do not sin. (Eph. 4:26)

4. Jesus’s anger

Jesus burned with anger when he turned over tables in the synagogue. I can’t easily dictate how you should behave when you feel the ire rising. In my experience, one option exists. Plead with God for victory over anger, and ask for his strength to act righteously. Let me encourage you: feelings of rage eventually soften as we walk through grief.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they *will*
be comforted.

Matthew 5:4, emphasis mine

Encouragers: Encourage your friend with the words above. Try not to provoke anger, but if you do, offer apologies and ask what he needs from you. Understand his feelings may not seem rational to you.

DEPRESSION

“I am deeply hurt and hurting deeply!” I wrote seven months after Brian died. And as time passed, “I feel like I’m not a good parent. I miss Brian badly. I cry so much. I don’t want to cook.” To top it off, I felt guilty about all of it. My doctor’s diagnosis: depression.

Who *wouldn’t* feel depressed? I once told my friend, Barbara, “I feel overwhelmed.” She wisely countered, “That’s because you *are* overwhelmed.” She listed numerous difficulties I faced and finished by stating, “It’s a miracle you function at all.”

Grief, stress, long-term illness, and the like can alter hormones, causing a chemical imbalance in the brain, which leads to some types of depression. The list below helps reduce most forms of mild depression:

- Exercise. Make sure you keep your body moving.
- Take intentional steps to do things you enjoy.

- Find a way to laugh. Laughter brings enormous relief.
- Read through the Psalms if you have a Bible. The Psalms are full of joy, as well as pain and lament. I found lots of encouragement from realizing the psalmist himself suffered from depression.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted,
and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalms 34:18

Encouragers: Again, approach this subject gently. Invite your friend to walk with you once a week, and listen graciously to her pain.

LONELINESS

Most widows tell me they find loneliness the most unbearable experience of grief.

Following are some notes I made the first year after Brian's death:

- I feel so alone and broken!
- I know the Lord is there for me, but he doesn't give physical hugs, and I would give almost anything right now for one big hug from Brian.
- Even though I have great friends, I still feel *all alone!*

It amazes me how much support we can receive from family and friends and yet still feel completely alone. Couples make a unit. When one member of that unit dies, we even feel alone in the middle of a crowd.

Early in our marriage, Brian teased me about some silly habit. I shot back, "Hey, you would miss this if I died." How profoundly true! I now miss his silly habits.

He regularly emptied his pockets, creating dusty piles. Although I cleaned up his piles soon after he died, I found myself longing for the dusty mess because it signified his presence with me.

Sadly, no matter how much I wanted him back, he couldn't come back. Simply knowing he couldn't return from the grave increased my loneliness. I couldn't comprehend how to go on without my best friend.

No solution to the loneliness really exists, other than staying busy, but even then, the loneliness attacks at the end of the day. The only solution I could muster was to find my comfort in the Lord.

I clung to him in my darkest hours. I cried out to him and begged him for strength to walk through the loneliness. I read passages from the Psalms and took note of David's loneliness. Even King David, who had everything—not to mention multiple wives—still felt alone and needed his Lord for comfort.

Keep in mind that finding comfort in God doesn't take away the loneliness. We simply lean on the Lord through the loneliness and find comfort in the fact that, although we *feel* alone, we are *not* alone.

Better is one day in Your courts than a thousand elsewhere;... For the Lord God is a *sun* and *shield*; the Lord bestows *favor* and *honor*; *no good thing* does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. O Lord Almighty, *blessed* is the man who *trusts* in You.

Psalms 84:10, 11–12, emphasis mine

Encouragers: Never tell a grieving widow not to feel lonely. His feelings of isolation are real. Listen to what he feels without making comments or suggestions, and spend time with him when you can.

SUDDEN MELTDOWNS

Sudden meltdowns overcome us when we least expect them. One minute we feel perfectly fine, and the next we dissolve into a puddle of uncontrollable sobs.

Meltdowns usually come as a surprise. A visual, a smell, or a sudden sweet memory can take us from a place of strength to a place of weakness in a matter of moments. We start crying and surprise even ourselves.

The night my church celebrated the retirement of our pastor (my father-in-law), I behaved as if attending a funeral instead of a retirement party. This event, the first gathering of the entire family since Brian's death about a year before, brought the ache in my heart to an unbearable level.

One of the leaders of the church began introducing the pastor's children to the congregation, all of whom attended, except Brian. I found myself completely unprepared when the leader asked my kids and me to stand and then introduced us as "Brian's family."

Exposed, vulnerable, and feeling completely alone, I sobbed as if Brian died just yesterday. I could no longer contain the tears I had tried so hard to hold back.

As the years pass the meltdowns lessen, but I'm not sure how long they will lurk, ready to pounce at any moment. I still cry when I meet someone who discloses her status of widow. I grieve for our children who continue to feel a void. I go to the cemetery on my anniversary or on Father's Day and cry in Howard's arms over Brian's absence.

Sudden meltdowns happen. We feel stupid, but we can't help ourselves. While at times grief may appear dormant, like an angry volcano it can erupt at any moment.

My advice? Go with it. We can't just turn off the spigot of tears. Meltdowns happen to all of us, and we don't need to apologize for them. Our tears testify to the love we shared with our spouse. Eventually we somehow learn to live with—and embrace—the mix of joy and sorrow.

Encouragers: Sudden meltdowns cause embarrassment. Laugh with your friend when he's ready, and remind him to expect meltdowns as a natural part of grief.

LORD, HELP ME!

Clinging to the Lord in my despair saved me, even though I found it difficult to focus in the midst of my intense grief. God remained my only hope.

I pleaded with the Lord to help me pray because I needed it so badly. A full year went by before I could pray more than a sentence or two at a time. I tried to read Scripture but found it hard to focus on what it said. To make it easier for you, I quote Scriptures throughout this book, portions that encouraged me during my grief journey.

Sometimes it helps to write your feelings down, if you can. I experienced much frustration and guilt over the fact that I couldn't seem to pray. Yet when I look back through things I wrote down, I realized I regularly prayed in written form. I wrote short pleas to my Lord for help and comfort. Don't worry about how you pray or the length of the prayer. Simply connect with the "Father of compassion and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3) in whatever way you can.

I found encouragement in seeing certain passages of Scripture make more sense. For example, “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the *Spirit himself intercedes* for us with groans that words cannot express” (Rom. 8:26, emphasis mine).

This verse came alive to me the day Brian received his cancer diagnosis. For the first time in my life, I couldn’t find words to express my deepest need. At times after he died, I simply thanked God for the Spirit who prays on my behalf and left it at that. God knows our needs even when we can’t express them. What a wonderful blessing!

The Psalms are packed with words of encouragement, as the psalmist pours his heart out to his Lord. Consider picking a short Psalm for each day. If you can’t focus on a short passage of Scripture, try writing it on paper, or in the sand. By rewriting it, you may find it easier to “hear” and find comfort in it.

Sing to the Lord, sing praise to his name,
extol him who rides on the clouds—his

name is the Lord—and rejoice before him.
A father to the fatherless, a defender of
widows, is God in his holy dwelling.

Psalm 68:4–5

Some of My Writing

- “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:21). Thankfully, when he takes away, he doesn’t go away.
- Elohim—God is *powerful*; the *strong* and *faithful one* . . . both to the Israelites in the past and to us in the present. Thank you, Lord, for being Elohim, the *strong* and *faithful one*, as well as Emmanuel, God *with* us. God is not only good when he takes away the pain, but he is also good in the middle of it.
- I have moments when I think I simply can’t go on, but I do, and I’m so thankful to the Lord for his strength.

Encouragers: Offer to read Scripture to your friend, write down a short Bible verse on a card and give it to her, and/or pray with her.

HAUNTING QUESTIONS

Many questions haunt widows. The point stays the same. If I did something differently, could I have changed the outcome?

James's wife, Irene, didn't pay much attention to her own health. She began feeling more tired than normal and attributed it to age. James suggested she check with her doctor, but she ignored his advice. After her death, James asked me many questions: Should he have insisted she go to the doctor? Could he have arrived at the hospital sooner? Could he have saved Irene's life?

I wrote the following response to one widow who asked, "Is God punishing me?":

I assume you've lived a normal Christian life, in which case this is filtered through God's love even though it doesn't feel like it. Remember how Job lost all his children and possessions in one day? In Job's case, Satan tried to knock him

down spiritually. God allowed it. God even recommended Job as the object of Satan's attack because God knew Job would remain faithful. I sometimes try to imagine difficulties as a compliment from God because he believes in me more than I believe in him.

For now, death brings great pain. During my worst times, I cling to this verse: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning" (Lam. 3:22–23).

"What if?" questions haunt people relentlessly. If I had gotten to the hospital sooner . . .? If someone had stayed with him . . .? If, if, if. In the end, we can't go back. Our loved one stays put in the grave, and we remain powerless to change it. How do we make sense of this?

I gain the greatest comfort from Jesus's story at the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22). Jesus, knowing he had to suffer torture and death, first pleaded with his

Father to deliver him but he knew salvation and forgiveness for all humanity required his death. Recognizing God's plan as much bigger than himself, he submitted to the Father's will.

I wanted Brian to live more than anything, but I understand God doesn't waste hardship. If Brian's death brought greater good, how could I selfishly cling to my own desires? Would I willingly trust God with my worst fear?

Better questions to ask:

- What does God want to accomplish through this loss?
- Will I willingly trust him even though it hurts?

Encouragers: Allow people to wrestle through these questions. They will likely ask the same questions repeatedly. Eventually, they will make peace with the answers.

FEAR

Looking back, I marvel at my own bravery as a single woman before marrying Brian. My mother worried about me more than I did. Once widowed, however, I marveled at my fear. Fear suddenly entered my life—in a big way. My faith remained strong, but my human anchor no longer lived in my world. His death snatched away my feelings of safety, and our family felt vulnerable.

Fear comes in many forms and we find ourselves plagued with many questions. How will I make ends meet? What if I can't do this alone? What if I can't hold on sexually? How will my kids make it without a dad?

Many people become obsessively protective after losing a loved one. Having faced the devastation of death, we worry about the possibility of losing other loved ones.

These logical questions and fear of failure scurry through our minds daily. We didn't choose these circum-

stances. We don't like them. We can make it through a whole lot more than we think we can, however.

Trusting the Lord with everyday details comes easier with time. I recommend you take note of your fears, whether rational or irrational, and practice committing them to God. Try to avoid placing your personal fears on your loved ones. We draw great anger and frustration when we become overly protective.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.

Isaiah 41:10

Encouragers: Fear comes easily after losing a loved one. If your friend overly protects loved ones, acknowledge his fear and gently encourage him to allow normal activity, especially with his children. Remind him children need to keep living.

REGRET

Early in my widowhood, I thought I avoided regret. During Brian's illness, I purposed not to regret the way I treated him. I didn't want to lament time not spent with him. I had time to appreciate every day and make conscious choices regarding guilt I didn't want to carry.

As time passes, though, memories jump to mind, and I wonder if I hurt him when I expressed frustration over things he couldn't fix. I regularly vented in his presence. I can't ask him now if that hurt. I can't apologize. I can't go back and change one thing.

Many who cared for their spouses during illness now express shame that they didn't show enough patience or kindness. No doubt we all could've done a better job. If you served as caregiver, you also know the exhaustion and stress that comes with the task.

I suggest considering all you managed. It might help you to realize the magnitude of the job. If you treated your spouse poorly at times, or got tired and

frustrated, you demonstrated normalcy. I don't want to excuse bad behavior, but we must accept the fact that we took on a completely exhausting job, both emotionally and physically. We can forgive ourselves for human failures.

If your spouse died suddenly, you didn't get the chance to make apologies or think through potential regrets. Possibly you and your wife argued right before she died, and now you feel terrible guilt. Maybe your relationship needed a doctor and now nothing can fix it.

Howard and I reconcile our guilt by reminding ourselves that, as believers in the presence of God, Brian and Ann (Howard's deceased wife) now forgive us. We sought forgiveness from our Lord and asked God to tell Brian and Ann we're sorry. We can't change the past, but we can learn from past failures, accept God's forgiveness, and make changes for the future.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it [becoming perfect]. But one thing I do: *Forgetting* what is behind and *straining* toward what is ahead, I *press on* toward the goal to win the prize for which God has

called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13–14, emphasis mine).

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

1 John 1:9

Encouragers: Listen to the widow’s regret. Express that you understand her guilt must make her feel badly. You can agree she probably made mistakes, but never blame. Encourage her to ask the Lord for forgiveness and offer to pray with her.

VULNERABILITY

I felt vulnerable and uncomfortable around most men because I didn't trust them. I wanted to be myself, but feared men getting the wrong idea. For me, marriage provided a sense of safety. When we feel secure in our marriages, we feel secure in other situations, including relationships with the opposite sex. When our marriage status suddenly flips to *widowed*, our sense of safety gets ripped from us as well, and we feel vulnerable. I found myself suddenly "available," the last place I wanted to be.

I feared everything, including letting others know I lived alone. Vulnerability fed my fear.

People regularly ask questions. I tend to relay my feelings honestly, but I found this unsafe as well. Navigating the pain of loss with the realization that others rarely care enough to listen to what we truly feel also made me feel emotionally vulnerable.

Because feelings overwhelmed me, I felt vulnerable in my loneliness, which dragged me down even

further. We wish we could end all the craziness. Unfortunately, we must persevere and submit to the time it takes to grieve. But take heart! This level of vulnerability decreases with time as we gain more confidence, and the weightiness of grief diminishes.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:. . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance,. . . He has made everything beautiful in its time.

Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4, 11

Encouragers: Never visit a widow of the opposite sex alone. Widows feel unsafe. Always take your spouse or someone of the same sex along. Only hug a widow of the opposite sex if your spouse stands by your side, and only hug her if she gives you permission. Feel free to ask.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

As widows, we typically feel alone and often fall into deep depression. My greatest encouragement came from Scripture. I find enormous comfort in Jesus's expression of emotion:

And he came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him. And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. And when he

rose from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping from sorrow, and he said to them, “Why are you sleeping? Rise and pray that you may not enter into temptation.” (Luke 22:39–46 ESV)

Notice how Jesus first asks the disciples to pray that they won’t fall into temptation. When Jesus then withdraws to pray by himself, he asks the Father to rescue him from death. Instead, his Father sends an angel to strengthen him.

I always assumed Jesus Christ, God’s Son, didn’t need strengthening. God the Father sent an angel, who strengthened Jesus and then—*after* receiving strength from the angel—Jesus continued to plead with the Father even more earnestly. This time, instead of showing strength, he pleaded with the Father to the point where sweat drops of blood poured from his body. Jesus expressed greater emotion than any other human in history.

Let me encourage you: Deep expression of emotion and grief fits within the realm of godliness. When friends tell you to “just trust God,” remind them Jesus pleaded with the Father to rescue him from

death, even after receiving strength from an angel. Jesus submitted to the Father's will, but he didn't like it.

Expressing emotion doesn't indicate a lack of faith. It simply signifies grief. We can love God and submit to his plan, but we don't have to like it.

Here's what we can learn from Luke 22:

- **Pray** honestly as Jesus did.
- **Trust** God's character even when bad things happen.
- **Understand** that God's plan looms bigger than us, and bigger than our own feelings or pain.
- **Believe** that when God chooses not to deliver, he provides strength.
- **Understand** that God's strengthening process doesn't always take away the pain.
- **Submit** to God's plan no matter what.

Encouragers: Encourage your widowed friends with this Scripture. Jesus showed deep emotion even though he trusted God's character. We can hold to strong faith while expressing deep emotional pain.

4

HUMAN INTERACTIONS

RELATIONSHIPS

“**T**he one thing you can count on in life is change,” states an old English saying. Sadly, relationships regularly change as well, especially in the aftermath of death. Some friends can handle our emotional ups and downs, while others can’t.

When we need our friends and family relationships the most, they often fall apart. Far too often I stood alone, baffled by the insensitivity of those who quickly disappeared after asking very personal and emotionally charged questions. I felt confused, hurt, and exposed. I finally learned to “play it safe” and not answer questions directly—certainly not with details.

My friend, Eve, couldn’t stand to see me sad. She continually encouraged me to find another man. Instead of quietly trusting God with her concerns about my situation, she tried to fix it without considering my feelings. I finally told her, “I’m going to be sad for a while. I need you to be okay with it.”

Family, especially the family of the deceased, grieves along with you. Unfortunately, everyone grieves differently and each person experiences different needs. Family relationships are notorious for becoming difficult in the aftermath of a death.

“O Lord, I need to keep my eyes on you! People keep letting me down,” I wrote in my journal. I thought of Job. His friends did well when they kept their mouths shut.

Interestingly, God required Job to pray for his friends even though they hurt him. Job prayed for forgiveness on behalf of his friends, but Scripture doesn’t tell us whether he continued a relationship with them.

Scripture tells us repeatedly to forgive so our sins will be forgiven (Matt. 6:14; Mark 11:21–25; Luke 6:37; 2 Cor. 2:10–11). We should at least pray for—and forgive—those who hurt us.

Helpful Suggestions

- Rely on those who will listen, encourage, and support you.
- If your friends try to instruct, gently tell

them you need a listener. Exasperated, I often wanted to scream, “I lost my husband, not my brains!”

- A social person by nature, I became much quieter and more withdrawn because grief took so much out of me. Slowly force yourself to re-enter social arenas.
- Tell your friends you love hearing their stories about your spouse.
- Gradually figure out this new life between you and God. Eventually, you will become less dependent on your friends.

When you wonder how to relate to others, keep in mind that, “Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4).

Your friends need you too. Try to listen to them even though you may find it difficult to focus. God has us in this place for this time. While we don’t need to feel guilty about our needs, we should try to hear our friends’ needs as well.

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,
live at peace with everyone.

Romans 12:18

Encouragers: Please don't allow yourself to cause more relationship trouble for your friend. Try to show love, patience, kindness, and a desire to understand.

IN-LAWS

My friend, LaTonya, works with military widows. She tells me they complain most about conflict with their in-laws. Numerous reasons exist for conflict with these family members. In my opinion, each party comes to the table with different expectations or needs.

Maria's in-laws don't easily express emotions. They change the subject when she mentions her deceased husband. Although every bit as real as Maria's, their needs oppose hers. They grieve differently. We should respect one another's needs as much as possible and expect complications to arise when needs vary.

In-laws may feel the right or responsibility to help rear children who still live at home. It helps for all involved to understand and define one another's unique roles, rights, and needs. Try calmly talking with them.

The issue of control runs a close second to that of expectations when it comes to stirring up conflict. Many in-laws can't give up control of their adult children. If

this problem occurred before their adult child died, it will most certainly continue after the adult child's death. They couldn't control the circumstances surrounding the death of their child, so they often grasp for control wherever they can.

Try to remember although your in-laws may not always comply with how you want or need to be treated, they usually hold positive intentions. Many don't know how to navigate discussing their desires and needs appropriately, and unfortunately, this can backfire. They are human just like you.

If possible, sit down and talk about expectations, desires, and needs. Try to come up with acceptable solutions. If you can't, set your own boundaries and insist on them. Even if they hurt your feelings, respond to them in the kindest possible manner, using Scripture as a guide:

- “Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking lies” (Psalm 34:13).
- “Do not repay anyone evil for evil....If it is possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live at peace with everyone. Do not take re-

venge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath..." (Rom. 12:17-19, emphasis mine).

Unless danger exists, allow your children access to their grandparents. You may set boundaries, but make sure your anger and hurt don't transfer to the children.

Elizabeth's in-laws took everything she owned when her husband died. She took them to court and won. The government required them to return everything to her. Once settled, she decided these people deserved a relationship with their grandchildren, even though they hurt her deeply. She forgave and they reconciled. While reconciliation may not always take place, Elizabeth did the right thing in making the effort.

Encouragers: You may find this one tough. Protect the widow and help her set realistic boundaries if her family mistreats her. Stand for what's right, but also try to make peace.

CHILDREN AND DEATH

Children respond differently to death than adults do, and small children may react differently than older children, although they feel the impact just as greatly.

Small children tend to behave badly because they can't express feelings well with words. Teenagers typically don't want to look different from their friends. They often pretend the loss didn't affect them.

My kids banded together those first months because hanging out with friends proved frustrating. Their friends didn't know what to say, and conversations usually ended awkwardly. Some of their friendships faltered.

I prayed with them when they shared their pain, and we limped along, one day at a time. I clung to the Lord for wisdom in dealing with my own sorrow as well as the sadness of my children.

Feel free to ask for help from loved ones and friends. Love your kids, listen to them, and hold them

accountable without provoking anger. Eventually, you *will* get through it.

Grown children can cause their own trouble when we lose our spouse. Some become bossy and treat us like children. Some get greedy and think they own rights to our stuff and our time. Some want us to move on, and others may join us in our grief.

Graciously express your needs to your grown children. Explain that you need them to understand your needs. Set boundaries if necessary, or ask them to visit now and then. Older widows often share with me their disappointment that their grown children seem too busy for them.

A year and a half after Brian's death, I wrote, "Mad, mad, mad!!!! I feel *really* angry tonight! It seems I am sad, crying, or angry! I thought I was doing better, but single parenting is about to do me in!!! I haven't been angry at Brian before, but tonight I feel extremely angry with him. It is totally unfair that I have to deal with all of this on my own!"

The reality of my single-parenting status hit me hard one day. My oldest son, Chad, took a bad fall and

needed a doctor. Just as we headed out the door, Nikki complained of a headache and chills. One child needed emergency medical care, while another one ran a fever, needing tender loving care at home! I couldn't meet both needs, and the irony of it all socked me in the gut. I was, indeed, a single parent!

This role can test everything in us. I remember telling friends, "These kids are driving me to my knees!" That's exactly where God wants us and where we should go.

The trauma of loss, coupled with the task of single-parenting, raises our stress to an all-time high. Clinging to the Lord, hanging on to his promises, and coercing one foot in front of the other forces us to cope.

Remember, your children grieve, too. They simply show it differently than adults. Children don't just "get over it." Don't let them fool you into believing they are fine. Our children need us, as well as a healthy mix of discipline, grace, and love.

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me,

and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.”

Luke 18:16

Encouragers: You can help by spending time with the children—if they want to do that. Mine resented other people stepping in. Eventually, they need other adults to care about them, but don’t offer more than you can commit to. They need stability and consistency.

5

CHOICES

DON'T BE STUPID

With grief comes the temptation to make bad choices. In our deepest pain, we feel desperate to make it stop. Please respect yourself enough to behave wisely. I hear alarming stories of people making bad choices in their grief, attempting to feel better. Carefully watch for these behaviors in your children as well.

Substance Abuse

Possibly the most common form of self-medication in America, alcohol sits readily available on shelves everywhere. I won't assume you think rationally at this point. Alcohol acts as a depressant. Do you want to risk feeling more depressed than you already do?

Scripture states clearly that we should “not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). According to Scripture we should focus our attention on filling ourselves with the Holy Spirit instead of allowing ourselves

to fall into any form of depravity. When tempted to drown your sorrows, try drowning them in Scripture.

Scripture may not erase your pain, but neither will drugs or alcohol. Trying to focus on just one encouraging Bible verse, though, may give you a ray of hope.

Sexual Relationships

Thousands of terribly sad stories come from those who act out their pain by getting caught up in sexual relationships outside of marriage. It's normal and healthy to desire sex. Emotional and physical protection, however, requires abstinence.

The Bible mandates, "It is God's will that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life....He who rejects this instruction... [rejects] God" (1 Thess. 4:3–8), and "The widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives" (1 Timothy 5:6).

Yes, the loneliness feels unbearable and the pain excruciating. Jumping into a new relationship too soon, however, usually ends in disaster. Do yourself a favor

and take time to grieve. Time better equips you to make a good choice and experience the joys of love again. Unfortunately, remarrying too quickly adds to the grief.

Money

Many people spend money to feel better. It can help temporarily, but if you can't afford to spend frivolously, it will lead to more trouble.

Hope

Believe me, I understand the temptation to make stupid choices. I understand the horrible waves of grief. I've been there. Know this: it may not *feel* like God cares right now, but he remains our only hope. Cling to him and cry out to him in your despair. Determine right now to hang on and not allow yourself to create more trouble by making stupid choices.

You can, and you will, get through this, but it takes time. Believe it or not, the more you try to mask your pain, the worse it gets in the long run.

He gives strength to the weary and increases
the power of the weak....But those who

hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they
will run and not grow weary; they will
walk and not be faint.

Isaiah 40:29, 31

Encouragers: You will find addressing bad choices with your friend difficult. Try to love him through it by showing him these suggestions and pray earnestly for him.

SEX

The death of a spouse brings many kinds of loss. The end of our sexual relationship is “just another loss,” said Japhet. Widows often feel guilty and don’t know what to do with their own sexual desires. I hear for some, intense grief masks sexual drive for a time, while others find sexual desires magnified.

From the very beginning of time, God made marriage a union with a sexual component. “For this reason, a man will...be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). On three different occasions God told man to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Gen.1:22; 9:1; 35:11), an impossible task to accomplish without engaging in sex. God created sex, and he fully expects husbands and wives to enjoy it.

Scripture tells us any kind of sexual activity between couples outside of marriage fits the sin category:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall

not commit adultery.” But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. (Matt. 5:27–28)

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. (1 Peter 2:11)

Sex outside of marriage reigns as the biggest trust-buster in a relationship. God wants us to enjoy sex in marriage, where it provides a sense of trust and oneness. Outside of marriage, it produces the opposite. God set these standards for our protection, not out of meanness. When we hold to God’s standards, emotional safety becomes more achievable, trust builds, and we steer clear of sexually transmitted diseases.

My goal is not to judge, but to offer wisdom and hope. If you participated in sex outside of marriage, but you now recognize God’s standard as just, right, and for your protection, take heart. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins

and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). God forgives all sin.

Ephesians 5:3 states, “Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality or any kind of impurity,...because these are improper for God’s holy people.” God says, “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44–45; 1 Peter 1:16 NASB).

When our spouse dies, so does our sex life. Mitchell felt guilty about sexual twinges he experienced as he hugged women on the day of his wife’s funeral. Thankfully, he read later that our bodies sometimes respond this way after loss. Imagine the guilt and confusion if we don’t understand normalcy!

So, what do we do about our sexual urges? No clear-cut answers exist as to how one should manage sexual desires during grief. The Bible says, “Everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28). It’s not okay to lust after someone other than your spouse. Therefore, masturbating while lusting after someone else, a picture (pornography), or anything other than your own spouse qualifies as sin.

Personally, I can't consider re-living memories with your spouse as sinful. After all, God saw your sexual relationship within your marriage as biblical and beautiful. Obsessing over your sexual experience with your spouse, however, may qualify as unhealthy.

God calls us to live a holy life, which includes a holy thought life, holy behavior, and holy sexuality.

Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body.

1 Corinthians 6:18

Encouragers: Many widows won't discuss this topic. If she brings it up, listen carefully and encourage her to make wise choices. Pray earnestly for her regarding this subject even if she doesn't talk about it.

REVEL IN THE GOOD DAYS

In good times, laughter comes easily and feels natural. In grief, we find it difficult. Yet I remember times when the ability to laugh surprised me. Most days felt nauseatingly painful and I wondered if I would ever know happiness again. When laughter erupted, it came as a welcome gift.

Experiencing happiness, even for a few minutes, throws some people into a canyon of guilt. I say revel in the good days and moments because they occur rarely. Death sucks the life out of us, so enjoy every good moment. It does our bodies good.

Laughter and joy can keep you hanging on for better days. Laughter doesn't mean you no longer miss your loved one. It simply means you found a ray of sunshine in the dark abyss.

If you happen upon a good day and find yourself able to laugh, revel in it. Laughter and tears can coexist.

Take advantage of your good days and find something productive or fun to do.

A cheerful heart is good *medicine*, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.

Proverbs 17:22, emphasis mine

Encouragers: Rejoice with your widowed friend, and encourage him to revel in his good moments too!

TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF

My standard advice to those who hurt: “You gotta do what you gotta do.” For a time, go easy on yourself. At some point, though, we must begin to force ourselves to make healthy choices—both emotionally and physically. But at the beginning, we strive only for survival.

My honest confession: For a long time after Brian died, I quit washing my face and brushing my teeth at night. I lived in a state of exhaustion, and these tasks took too much effort. “Who cared or would even notice anyway?” I justified. In my survival mentality, I allowed myself some slack until coping came easier.

Healthy Eating

I find myself observing widows and widowers. Few maintain their normal, healthy weight. Most either gain weight or lose too much. Grief greatly affects our eating habits. Do your best to stay healthy and balance your eating. You will feel better.

Emotional Needs

Proactively care for your emotional needs. This may involve sharing them with others or finding a trusted friend or counselor with whom you can talk openly. We also care for ourselves by standing up for our own needs and kindly teaching others what that looks like to us. I wanted people to understand. If they listened with compassion, I willingly and honestly shared my heart.

The Bible says, “The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help” (1 Tim. 5:5). In my opinion, hope doesn’t exist without God. Sometimes all we can manage for a while is to hope in God and plead with him for help.

Encouragers: Broach this subject very carefully. Most widows won’t want to hear your input unless you validate their feelings. If they ask you a question directly, gently answer it honestly. Encourage the widow to talk about concerns, but work hard not to criticize.

NUGGETS OF GRACE

Blessings occur in the storm. Don't miss them. From my experience God always shows up, even on difficult days.

When Brian died, I could see small nuggets of God's goodness. Eventually I understood that just the ability to get up every morning and take my children to school qualified as a blessing. Some days I could laugh. My family and a few close friends stuck by me. I could call any one of them at any time, pour out my heart, and receive comfort. They couldn't carry my burden, but they helped support me through it.

Two months after Brian's death I kept thinking about a book I read as a child. I didn't remember the details of the book, but I knew it changed my life. I felt compelled to find this book called *Not My Will*.²

I purchased the book and devoured it in one day. I sat in my bed weeping as the realization of God's amazing grace to me sank in. God himself placed this

book in my hands a full thirty-five years earlier to prepare me for this day. How could I not fall down and worship him for loving me that much? If God could put a book into my hands on a remote island of Indonesia three and a half decades before I needed it, I knew I could trust him to care for my wounded soul.

Every good and perfect gift comes from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

James 1:17

Encouragers: You will find yourself tempted to point out nuggets of grace. Most of the time, those who grieve don't want to hear it from you. Allow the widow to tell you about the grace moments and then encourage her to keep track of them for future encouragement.

HOPE

Where do we find hope? Can we find hope? Widows may need hope more than anything. Many of us lose hope. The loss of our spouse and best friend fills us with hopelessness, which leads to depression.

After Brian's initial diagnosis, several people in my life tried to encourage me with empty words. I found no comfort in them. Finally, I snapped and told one friend her words didn't help.

"What *does* encourage you?" she asked.

"The hope that God will see me through."

Truly, my only hope rested in the character and trustworthiness of my Heavenly Father.

I met with Vera, whose husband also battled brain cancer. She didn't want to hear about God. I didn't know how to help her without bringing God into it. Through it all, he remains my only hope.

We can't count on people, doctors, friends, or family to save us from our sorrow. Nor can they bring

our spouses back from the grave. The only person to ever conquer the grave is Jesus Christ, and Scripture tells us the final enemy to see defeat is death.

...“Death has been swallowed up. It has lost the battle.” (1 Cor. 15:54 NIrV)

My new husband, Howard, loves to explain the coming resurrection of believers who die on earth, the reunion they can expect with their bodies, and everlasting life on the New Earth:

Our resurrection hope reaches into the grave and overwhelms the devastation of death. Resurrection will restore what was amputated, compensate for all that was stolen, and reverse the irreversible.³

If we (and our spouse) know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, we can count on a reunion on the New Earth. Although our marriage relationship won't continue, Howard believes Scripture teaches we will know each other and remember our earthly union.

Clearly, I can't continue a marriage relationship with both Howard and Brian in eternity, but possibly we can enjoy a close friendship.

The Bible says we don't grieve in the same way as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13) because we will see our loved ones again.

How can we find this hope? The Bible tells us to “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

What exactly does this mean?

- In the beginning God created a perfect world, which he declared to be “very good” (Gen. 1:1, 31).
- The humans God placed in this perfect world disobeyed him. In that instant sin entered the world and separated us from God (Gen. 2:4–3:24).
- God loves every human. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).
- Recognize yourself as a sinner, separated from

God. “For *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23, emphasis mine).

- God sent his Son, Jesus, to die on a cross and pay the price for our sins. He was buried and rose again on the third day, defeating death and sin. “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).
- We can accept and trust Jesus as the One who gives us the gift of hope. “For it is by grace you have been saved through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the *gift* of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph. 2:8–9, emphasis mine).

How to Accept the Gift of Hope

We must only believe:

- God created and loves us.
- We live as sinners.
- Jesus died for our sins.
- Jesus gives us the gift of hope.

We can pray and thank him for loving us, apologize for our sin, acknowledge that we sin regularly, and then ask him to take over our life and give us hope. A simple prayer of repentance and acceptance places us into the family of God forever.

Encouragers: Freely ask your friend to share with you his source of hope. With his permission, share your source of hope.

Part Three

WHEN DEATH NO
LONGER WINS

MOVING FORWARD

“**W**hen are you going to move on?” People asked me these kinds of questions regularly. I hate the words, “move on” and refuse to use them. How can someone ask me to move on from the one I loved and lived with for nineteen years?

I will never stop loving Brian. He was my best friend for twenty years. We parented three children together. We fought the enemy of cancer together. We laughed and cried together. We shared a faith that gave us hope.

I know our friends want us to find happiness when they tell us to move on. They really mean well, but they don't understand the loss of your best friend and lover. Most widows don't want to move on. We don't want to forget.

Yes, at some point we need to find a way to happiness. We need to make a new life for ourselves. But we will carry the grief with us. We eventually learn to live with a mix of joy and sorrow.

At this point, I feel happy on most days. I find great joy in my new life. But days still sneak up on me when the grief overwhelms and I feel completely hopeless. I tire of the grief when it hits, and I wish I *could* “get over it” and move on.

I like to say we move *forward*. We adapt to a new, different life. We learn to enjoy a new normal. We appreciate the gifts God gives us. We find happiness again. But the love, life, and memories we shared with the dead don’t just go away because they left this earth.

The righteous keep moving forward, and
those with clean hands become stronger
and stronger.

Job 17:9 NLT

Encouragers: Widows find it offensive when told to “get over” their spouse and “move on.” Encouraging them to keep moving *forward*, however, helps give them hope. Please keep in mind that even when they find happiness again, they will continue to experience sad moments.

REMARRIAGE?

Remarriage can bring great joy as well as great sorrow. I would do it all over again, but the task of putting two families together can destroy a couple if they don't enter in with all the gusto they can muster.

In 1 Corinthians 7:1–9, Paul highly recommends widows remain unmarried to give themselves to ministry. If the widow burns with sexual passion, however (1 Cor. 7:9), Paul endorses marriage.

First Timothy 5:3–16 gives direction to the church regarding widows. Timothy places the obligation on family to care for their widows as much as possible. If the church must support widows, he suggests widows over sixty practice “good deeds” of service to receive help from the church. These are *recommendations*. It appears widows may choose whether they remarry.

One can never fully prepare, but we should at least know some of the obstacles to expect. Remarriage comes as a beautiful gift, but it also brings with it a

surprising number of challenges. When we remarry, grief tags along. If we don't enter in knowingly, the dynamics resulting from grief can destroy our new union.

When we remarry, we blend families, belongings, traditions, and cultures. This can stress any marriage, and when you add children to the mix, trials multiply. We found unimaginable happiness in remarriage, yet, blending families brought both joy and pain.

I experienced a new kind of grief, which I dubbed "reverse grief." I grieved the future I didn't get to enjoy with Brian, the past I missed with Howard, and the history we hadn't developed with each other's children. Howard and I prioritized time together, and we eventually created our own memories.

Have I ever been jealous of Ann, Howard's first wife? Yes, indeed. How do I manage it? I remind myself of my desire to remember and love Brian. If I want the freedom to hold onto my love for Brian, I owe Howard the same courtesy.

We will naturally like some things better about our dead spouse than we do our new one. We will also like some things better about our new spouse than we

did our deceased one. This is simply a fact. Don't get caught in the trap of comparisons.

Let's be honest. Widows feel deprived of so many things, including sex. If we decide to remarry, we eagerly anticipate expressing love to our new mate sexually. May I remind you again that grief follows us into our new marriages? Both Howard and I shut down sexually on our honeymoon. Although we looked forward to our new sexual freedom, what felt familiar in our first marriages, unexpectedly felt foreign with each other. Thankfully we talked about it, prayed and cried together, and worked through it.

Although difficult, I think marriage is wonderful and well worth the effort. You must decide for yourself. Howard and I experience more happiness than we have in years. The first couple of years tested everything in us, but we made it through. We live united and thank the Lord daily that we no longer face life alone.

So, they are no longer two, but one flesh.
Therefore, what God has joined together,
let no one separate.

Matthew 19:6; Mark 10:9

Encouragers: Try to understand not all widows want to remarry, especially in the first couple of years. Don't pressure them to marry or to stay single. Instead, encourage them to follow God's leading. If they choose to remarry, listen and encourage them through the adjustments. They need their friends in this process too.

WE'RE GONNA MAKE IT, BABE!

When the doctor informed us that our first child entered the world with a heart condition, Brian coined the phrase,

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When our second son presented with severe asthma, Brian reminded me,

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When our monthly medical expenses equaled half of our house payment, Brian repeated it.

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When his CT scan indicated an “impressive tumor,” he held his stance.

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

If I had known the day Brian fell ill what the next ten to fifteen years would look like for me, I might’ve given up. God blesses us by not revealing all the details up front. As I near the completion of this book, I truly stand in awe. I survived.

Somewhere along the line we find a way to scratch our way out of the darkness of death. While we still grieve, we encounter more joy than sadness, and we discover how to keep living. I pray this book provides you with some maps for the road you travel, and that you will soon look back and discover you made it too.

When I married Howard and the kids rebelled, he adopted the phrase,

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When I hesitantly agreed to take on the presidency of Howard’s ministry vision, he reminded me,

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When I feel insecure about my ability to write a book for widows, Howard tells me,

“You’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When all else fails, Howard asks me, “What would Brian say?” I always know the answer.

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

When you find yourself deep in the throes of grief, let me remind you,

“We’re gonna make it, Babe.”

END NOTES

- 1 Jerry A. Sittser, *A Grace Disguised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 29.
- 2 Francena A. Arnold, *Not My Will* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1946).
- 3 K. Howard Joslin, *Honest Wrestling* (Rowlett: Authenticity Book House, 2012), 198.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fran Geiger Joslin was born to missionary parents in the jungles of Indonesia. She married Brian Geiger in 1989. Ten years later their world came crashing down when her husband received a terminal cancer diagnosis.

Brian lost his battle with the disease almost nine years later. Devastated by the loss of her best friend, Fran—along with her kids—clung to the Lord to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives.

By God's amazing grace, just two and one-half years after Brian's death, Fran met and married a widower, Howard Joslin. They combined families, bringing together a total of seven children, five of whom were teenagers when they married.

Fran enjoys writing and mentoring young women. She serves as president of Authenticity Book House, a nonprofit publishing ministry, which she and Howard started together in 2014. The ministry publishes *simplified pastoral training in bite-sized books* for Swa-

hili-speaking pastors and church leaders in East Africa. Books are also available in English.

Connect with Fran:



FranGeigerJoslin.Wordpress.com



FranGeigerJoslin@gmail.com



www.Facebook.com/FranGeigerJoslin