

FOR WIDOWED FOLKS: HOW GRIEF REPROGRAMS OUR BRAIN



By: Dr. Bob Baugher

Your husband or your wife died. It matters little whether it was a sudden death or chronic illness. Either way you are left alone. You are now coping with two deaths: That of your spouse and the death of who you used to be. Who are you now? Do you still feel married? If you do, you are not alone. Do you remember the first time you checked the box on a form that said “Widow” or “Widower”? Widow(er)hood has forced you to be unmarried. How fair is that? You crawl into bed and no one is there—to touch you in that special way—to confirm that you are cared for. You awaken each day alone. One widowed woman said it well: “When you are widowed, you are not #1 in anyone’s life anymore.” How can any human exist day after day in this condition?

The answer lies in the fact that your brain has been forced to reprogram itself in ways it could never imagine. As you well know, adjusting to the absence of a spouse is not one or two things. It is hundreds and thousands of new brain circuits created in order to adjust to this new reality. And these new brain adjustments do not come easily. Your brain fights it each step of the way. So many things have changed in your life: the presence of another human being, conversation, touch, meals, finances, and new tasks to learn, just to name a few. Even if your children live with you, most everything is different. Moment-to-moment your brain fights to retain a daily world that used to be—however, to no avail. You could choose to escape in denial and say, “My husband didn’t die—he’s still at work.” “My wife is just down the street.” Some people make a valiant attempt at denial, but of course it never works. Never.

So, here you are driving your car, eating dinner alone, lying in bed curled up crying so hard you cannot breathe. You want things like they used to be. You look at couples and wonder how they were lucky enough to still be together. Your brain begs for answers: Why did this happen to me? Why now? Why didn’t I die first? How can I go on like this? What will happen to me? You ask these questions again and again. No answers come.

You hear people say, "You are now in a new normal." Your brain protests, "I don't want a new normal. I want my husband (or wife) back." Your helpless brain slowly, reluctantly begins to change its previous view of the world. The time it takes is unpredictable. For most people we're talking years. To the people around you, you may look the same, but inside you have changed. The people around you may have been waiting for the "old you" to return. However, with time, they begin to realize that this is never going to happen. Your brain has rewired itself in ways that you could never go back.

So, what can you do? Most widowed folks do what millions (billions?) before them have done: they grieve and they grieve some more. They awaken each day with their poor brain grudgingly adjusting to a new life. They speak to others who have been through a similar grief. Many find ways to still feel connected to their spouse by feeling their spouse's presence, looking at pictures and videos, talking to their spouse, and holding onto beloved items. Despite their pain, the majority of widowed people reluctantly find ways to continue to live.

The life as you knew it has been ripped away from you. The person you hoped would still be in your life is gone. In the midst of all your pain, your brain has been forced to rewire itself in an effort to cope with these incredible changes. Day after day you awaken with the belief that you will always feel this way. However, as your brain creates its thousands of new pathways, you find that you have emerged a person who has faced grief, loss, and pain in ways that you can see growth even though you had no desire to "grow" in this way. You will never forget this person who was in your life. Despite the years since the death, your brain has given you a gift: it has discovered ways to hold onto and revisit the memories of this person. It has created enduring connections with your loved one in ways that last a lifetime. And for that, you can thank your brain.