

*I wrote this book to help others like me who are on a journey of grief. I consider it a handy “companion” to use along the way. If you have experienced a tragic loss, or know someone else that has, the road of grief doesn’t have to be walked alone.*

# **GRIEF: Hope in the Aftermath**

By Gary Sturgis

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# GRIEF

Hope in the Aftermath



Gary Sturgis

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## **Chapter Six**

### **When Will It Get Better?**

I remember after my spouse died, I went into the local post office and the very nice lady at the counter handed me my mail, offered her condolences, and shared sadly, “I lost my daughter in a car accident.” I’m so sorry. When did you lose her? “Fourteen years ago,” adding solemnly, “You never forget.”

She’s not the only one to echo that sentiment to me. And ten years out from the death of my spouse, it’s certainly been true for me. I still grieve. The pain has healed but the grief is forever. It never really gets “better,” it just gets “OK” as time goes on.

Sometimes my memories are happy, warm, funny, and uplifting. And sometimes they’re, well, they aren’t so nice. I’ve been going through some of the not-so-nice times lately. It’s been an unfortunate, and terrible blend of sadness over the pandemic and all the lives lost. My job as a healthcare worker adds to the memories of my spouse’s suffering as I see others experiencing the same pain and loss.

When I give advice to caregivers, I always mention to try to take care of themselves. I tell them we’re all in it for the long haul. Little did I know how important my advice was for myself! But I was willing to pay that price for my spouse. What other choice was there! I loved. I lost. And



I was thrown into a world I never wanted to know. Now I'm seeing others going through it daily. Again, I have no choice. My heart tells me to do what I need to do. Help others that need me.

I worry that the people I love the most will die. That I'll be the cause of it because of what I do for work. My faith in life's goodness and purpose has been severely tested. And many times, it's been difficult to find my way out of the darkness. And it's not only the loss of my spouse, but also the loss of blissful ignorance of life's hardships. When we're young, or when bad things haven't happened yet, we think we're going to live forever. And then the bad things happen, and you learn what CAN happen. And once that information exists we just can't forget it. Ever!

I've decided just because the person I loved the most in the world died, that I'll continue to help others, despite the threat of them being taken away. And if they are, celebrate that I had something that death itself can't claim. Love.

When will it get better? When will I be back to my normal self? When you lose a loved one you care so immensely about, you just aren't the same person anymore. You've been impacted in a way that will forever change you—but that's not to say you're forever changed in a negative way. There are so many life lessons to learn from loss: one being just how beautiful love is, let alone, life!

I would have to say that it will get better when you begin to find meaning in the loss and appreciate the relationship you had no matter how long it lasted. Life is amazing that we can find someone or something that means so much to us that when that person or thing is no longer here, we feel pain and sorrow because of it.

Can you imagine going through life never knowing such tremendous love that would later cause such profound grief? If so, we would live a very emotionless life.

*“I’ll never understand why my wife killed herself. I knew she suffered from depression, but she was getting help and taking medication. I just believed that she knew how much I loved her and that she would never want to leave me alone. But I’ve come to a place in my life where I know she did what she thought she had to do, and perhaps it had nothing to do with me at all. I believe the sadness she carried in her heart existed there long before I came along and if anything, she held on as long as she did because she loved me. I’ll always be sad that she’s gone but I’m glad that she picked me to love, and I hope in some small way that if she did have happiness in her life it was because of me and my love for her.” – Ed C.*

## **Chapter Sixteen**

### **Physical Symptoms**

After a loved one dies we seem to be asked the same question over and over again. “How are you doing?” It’s a simple question. We all know how to respond. We keep it simple. We keep it brief. We lie. “I’m okay” or “I’m doing well.” We certainly don’t want to say anything awkward or concerning that might make the other person feel uncomfortable. We definitely don’t want to say anything that would require any follow-up questions. But I don’t need to tell this to those of you who are grieving, because you know what I’m talking about. The feelings we have after a loved one dies are a huge tangle of emotions, and the real answer would be much more complex and messier.

Grief is so often described as an emotional experience, but you may be surprised to know how much grief can affect your physical health. After my loss I felt like my whole body had been run over by a bus. Caring for my spouse all those months caused me to lose weight, sleep, and any sense of a normal routine. I was surprised to learn that the grief and stress associated with my loss could have such a profound effect on my body. During the first four to six months, I had many physical issues that I had never experienced before, and this is very common after the loss of a loved one.

The most common complaint among those of us grieving is that we feel tired. It's because our immune system becomes compromised. The immune system is our body's defense system helping us to fight off illness and disease. Grief makes us more susceptible to colds, flu, and other infections. We feel so run down that we don't have the ability to fight off illness.

We often say that our heart aches or breaks after the death of a loved one. I don't exactly know if this is true, but I had a heart attack after my loss and the hospital chaplain came to visit me in the Intensive Care Unit. She said, "Perhaps this attack was all that built up grief catching up with you." She told me that there is a condition called Takotsubo Syndrome or "Broken-heart Syndrome" in which the symptoms are similar to a heart attack, such as shortness of breath and chest pains. My heart attack was caused by Coronary Artery Disease which most likely was hereditary, but that can also be made worse by stress, and grief is stressful!

The loss of a loved one can also cause problems with the gastrointestinal system. People complain of "butterflies" in the stomach, constipation, bloating, diarrhea, heartburn, and acid reflux. Grief is a stressor, and if you're already someone that has a sensitive gastrointestinal system, the added stress of grief can almost immobilize you. It can feel like there's not only a hole in your heart but also in your stomach.

There are so many physical symptoms that can impact our grieving body. We get headaches, shortness of breath

and general aches and pains. The burden of grief is heavy on the body, so we have to take care of ourselves during the process. Doing things like eating right, exercising, and getting a good night's sleep are so important. But when we're grieving, we don't always have an interest in doing these activities. Sometimes the pain of our grief is so intense it's an effort just to get out of bed. We just don't have the energy. Just getting through each hour of the day can be a major challenge.

The best way to start is slowly. We can begin by walking 10 or 15 minutes a day and it can even be an enjoyable stroll through the park or on the beach. We don't have to eat a big meal. We can eat small amounts of food throughout the day and stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water. By doing these things we begin to feel more energetic, which allows us to increase the activities we can perform.

Grief interrupts our normal brain functioning, and our brain is in charge of sending signals to the rest of the body. Although everyone grieves differently, most people experience some physical symptoms when grieving the loss of a loved one. But if your physical symptoms are becoming a problem, please see your doctor. Never assume that all your symptoms are grief related. You may have a more serious condition that should be addressed by a health professional. Although it's hard to do much when you don't feel well, it's important not to ignore the signs your body is giving you.

*“Early grief was intensely physical for me when my father died. After the initial shock and adrenaline of the first few weeks wore off, I went through a couple of months of extreme fatigue, nausea, headaches, loss of appetite and lack of sleep. I found it extremely difficult to do anything. I never realized how awful grief could make me feel physically. It was hard enough to get up in the morning because I was missing my father so much, and then it became even worse when I was feeling so physically sick. I went to my doctor, and he told me most of my symptoms were brought on by the stress of my loss. He showed me ways to take better care of myself. I had spent so much time taking care of my father, I forgot how to take care of myself.” – Cheryl P.*

## **Chapter Twenty-Five**

### **Keeping a Connection**

Sometimes we don't have anyone to talk to about our loss. Perhaps our support group members aren't available, or our grief counselor isn't free. We can talk to our friends and family, but they don't always understand what we're going through. I suggest having a conversation with your dead loved one. I do. All the time! I recommend to members of the support groups I facilitate to talk to their loved one whenever they feel it's needed. If other people think this is strange, I wouldn't worry about it. That's their problem and not yours. It may seem a bit unusual but talking to someone who has died is common for many people, and a powerful coping strategy. I find comfort in talking to my loved one and it brings me solace and relief. It allows me to still feel the love connection that I believe never dies. I think it's beneficial to healing. We never have to say goodbye if we continue to stay connected, and one way of doing that's to keep talking to them.

Talking to the people we love after they're gone is a way of demonstrating the love that still exists even in separation. It helps us to keep their memory alive. We'll always have a relationship, though physically separated, and by talking to them we continue to honor them. We can make talking to them a daily ritual. This is one way that can help us have the strength and courage to move forward. Remembering them and talking to them is a



hopeful way to begin and end our days. In this way we can learn to live our lives with a deeper meaning and purpose.

A conversation with our deceased loved one can also be a great way to release tension and anxiety. I'll often yell at my spouse for leaving me alone with all the tasks of life. We can yell and scream at this person and know that we have the freedom to express how we feel both mentally and physically. Doing this with an actual living person may not always be appropriate. We feel more comfortable telling our loved one how we feel because they often know us best. It can make us feel like they are still around and get us through some of our more difficult situations. It gives us a sense of inner peace to be able to tell our loved one when something bad happens, just as it is when something good happens.

Another good way to communicate with your loved one is by writing down your thoughts. One of the best activities to heal our grief is writing a letter to our loved one and letting them know how we feel. No other form of grief therapy gives the immediate helpful, healing experience as writing it all down. After you write the letter you can also write what you think their response would be and this can also make you feel a connection to them. Find a comfortable and quiet place to write and tell your loved one anything you wish you had said, forgotten or never got to say, or simply tell them you love them. Writing this type of letter can often be the first step in gaining acceptance that they are physically gone. We can tell them what life is like without them and share our favorite memories. When we write and tell them what has been happening

since they've gone, it allows us to see our own growth, healing and how much we've changed because of their absence. We can also tell them what we miss or regret or any unresolved issues in our relationship. This can give us a sense of closure for the aspects of the relationship that may not have been so good. We can also thank them for spending the rest of their life with us.

Once the letter is written it doesn't really matter what we do with it. We can destroy it, seal it in an envelope and save it, keep it in our pocket or send it to someone else that might appreciate it. The point is that we got our feelings out and shared them with our loved one, which is healing.

I believe when we talk to our loved one, they listen. They listen to our prayers, and they hear our sorrow. When we cry they want us to laugh. When we're sad they want us to be happy. They watch us slowly try to put our life back together. They feel joy when they see us healing and moving forward. We can still talk to them because they still care about us. They know our life here isn't over yet and they want us to enjoy it to the fullest extent possible. They love us and want the very best for us. When our life is over, they'll be waiting for us.

*“I talk to my mother every day. She died 12 years ago but I still fill her in on what I’m doing. Sometimes when life presents me with a situation I don’t know how to handle, I ask her what to do. I know this might sound crazy, but she answers me. Not in words. It’s more of a feeling. I suppose because I loved her so much, I know in my heart what her response would be, because she cared so much about me. She knew me better than anybody else in the world and she would always want the best for me in any situation. I’m very much like my mother. The values and compassion I have were a gift from her. So, I think in some way I’m keeping her alive by sharing those traits with my own children.” – Patty S.*

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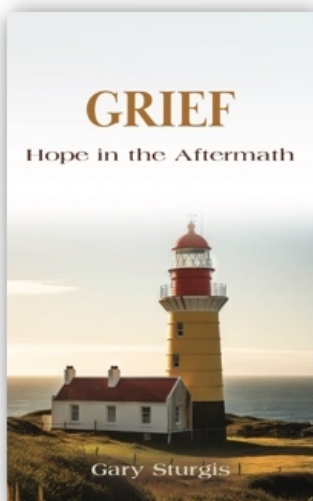
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If you have any comments, questions, or would like to share your own experiences with grief and healing, you can also email me at:

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I look forward to hearing from you!



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