

Your Personal Coach

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I am a senior citizen, and I have some heart problems but none that are life-threatening. My husband died three years ago, and I just can't seem to get back into the swing of things. Richard was my everything, and we didn't have a lot of friends, just a few. At first, they called and asked me for dinner or to go for a ride, but I just didn't feel like it. Now they hardly ever call. My husband and I were married for fifty-one years, and I'm so lonely now. Our children love me, but they live hundreds of miles away and rarely visit or call, so I can't count on them for company. Sometimes I just sit and cry.

-- Martha

Dear Martha,

You sound as if you are depressed, or at the very least, you've given up on life. To grieve for the loss of a spouse or partner is necessary and healthy. But our grief should give way to an increasing desire to rejoin the world, as time passes and we begin to heal. Now, don't get me wrong. Some losses in life – like the death of a long-term partner – are so profound, so deep, that we will never be the same again. But we do have a choice about how we will respond to these heart-breaking events.

We can choose to become bitter (“No one has ever suffered what I have suffered.”), and close down, refusing to love or laugh again. Or we can choose to be better – to recognize that every day is a gift -- and we can treasure every moment of our human experience. Sometimes, even when we choose “better,” we go through many days with tears and sadness even amidst our new life.

Martha, you need to reach out. First of all, I'd call those adult kids of yours and remind them that love is a verb, not a noun. If they love you, then they will think of you and communicate that to you. I understand that it is more challenging for families separated by miles to show support for one another, than it is for those families who live geographically close. But the truth is that there are trains, planes, and automobiles. There are greeting cards, letters, email, telephones, and fax machines – all just waiting for us to reach out and touch someone. Let your kids know that you need their support.

Next, I'd call those old friends who tried to be there for you shortly after Richard's death. Tell them you appreciate their reaching out to you, but you weren't quite ready then. Let them know that you're coming around, and would like to reconnect with them. Invite them for dinner, or to go out for a cup of coffee. You may have turned them down so many times that they simply stopped calling for fear of bothering you. Though, truth be told, if they were close friends they probably should have persevered.

Get involved in your community. Volunteer. There is no other way as powerful in moving through grief as to give another a helping hand. Join a civic organization. Attend a church. Take a class in something you always wanted to know about. Hang out at a senior center where older people are still vibrant and alive. There is no end to things you can do to live a happy and rich life. Make new friends.

Grieve when you have to. You may experience lots of sad times as you get back out into the world. Think about how you will feel when you encounter: The restaurant

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3/24/04

where you and Richard spent your fortieth anniversary dinner; The church where you were married; The place on the beach where you used to fish together. All will hold bittersweet memories – a joyful nostalgia mixed with the reality of missing him. Stick some tissues in your pocket, and go there anyway.

I once heard author/physician Bernie Siegel give a keynote to a group of Hospice volunteers. He was talking about things he has said to people in your situation – grieving for the loss of a loved one. “I saw that death certificate,” he says. “And there was only one name on it. And it wasn’t yours.” Get back into life, Martha.

If, after following up on some of these suggestions, you don’t feel any better, make an appointment with a counselor or therapist who has experience in helping people grow through grief. Good luck to you.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.