



Ask an expert

Question

My brother and I are worried about our mom, even a little embarrassed, because she started dating already. It's only been eight months since Dad died. Last week she teased that she might get married again. She is 72 and in good health, but isn't it too soon? I made sure to meet him, and he seems nice, but still. They met online through one of those "matching" services. When Dad was in hospice they had good talks, she told me, including the idea that she might have another man in her life some day. She said my dad was supportive of that scenario. But I don't know if I am. Is it smart for a widow to date so soon? Is she running from her grief?

Answer

Thank you for sharing your worries and questions about your mother. It is not unusual for adult children to have concerns about how their mother or father is doing following the death of their spouse.

These include concerns about managing day-to-day details, including finances, medications, ...continued on p. 2

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Feeling bad about feeling good

by Kenneth J. Doka

Kristin, a mother whose son had died in Afghanistan, shared with me that she recently enjoyed attending a concert in her town. But as soon as it ended, she was remorseful. "I felt overwhelming guilt. How can I possibly enjoy myself now that Kevin has died?" she asked.

One of the most corrosive feelings in grief is that of guilt. Guilt can come in many forms and often complicates grief. We can believe that our actions—or failure to act—had a role in causing our loss. We may feel a personal sense of guilt—that we could have been a better friend, parent, child, or spouse. We can feel guilty that we are alive, that we survived, when someone else died. We can experience moral guilt—thinking of grief as a deserved punishment. We can even feel guilty that we might be grieving poorly—taking too much time, reacting so strongly that others wonder if we are "milking" our loss—feeling worse than we should.

But perhaps one of the often experienced yet rarely discussed forms of guilt is recovery guilt. Like Kristin, we see any type of good day—a day not drenched in sorrow—as a betrayal. We believe that the only legitimate reaction to our loss is to experience unrelenting misery.

Yet such a feeling misunderstands the natural ebb and flow of grief. Most of us experience grief as a series of good and bad days. We experience sadness on bad days and focus on rebuilding a life changed by loss on good days. Two researchers from the Netherlands, Drs. Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut, described it as the "dual process" of grief.

Grieving, Stroebe and Schut found, entails alternating between two key tasks. One task is mourning our loss. The other task involves learning to live life in the face of loss. If we only focus on mourning our loss, grief can become chronic. If we only stress rebuilding our life, ignoring our grief, grief can be repressed and delayed. It is the

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Only when we are brave enough to explore the darkness will we discover the infinite power of our light.

– Brene Brown, *The Gift of Imperfection*

No wrong ways to grieve?

by Charles A. Corr

Judith persuaded Sam to go to a marriage and family therapist when they were having some difficulties in their marriage. After their appointment, Judith said that she thought Marilyn, the counselor, had been helpful, although Sam was not so sure.

Months later, after Sam's death, Judith went back to Marilyn. She had been reading a book that offered guidance to the bereaved and told Marilyn she was worried that she wasn't grieving correctly. The book suggested that grieving persons were expected to behave in specific ways, but her experience had been different.

Marilyn urged Judith not to worry because, she said, "There is no right or wrong way to grieve." Judith accepted that advice at the time, but as she moved forward in her bereavement, she somehow thought it wasn't quite right.

Perhaps it is not accurate to say there are no "wrong" ways to grieve. Surely, there are ways of grieving that are

unproductive and might, in fact, be unhelpful.

Ben Wolfe, a colleague and an experienced grief counselor, recently shared with me some of the harmful examples he has seen over the years. Drinking too much

alcohol or using illicit drugs to "get through" difficult feelings. Spending money impulsively, especially when one doesn't have money to spend. Eating and eating some more as a way to "fill the emptiness." Being sexually active with person(s) outside a partner after the death of a child.

When we reflect on these behaviors or actions or discuss them with an experienced counselor, we can quickly see that they only lead to more problems.

Much the same is true when we don't do the positive things that we know would be helpful: exercising, getting adequate rest, eating nutritious meals, and keeping ourselves hydrated. From a social standpoint, it is unhelpful to always say "no" when friends want to stop by for a cup

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and housekeeping. Dating, if and when it happens, is very high on the list of concerns of adult children for their surviving parent.

Adult children feel a level of responsibility for their grieving parent and want to be confident that their parent is making wise decisions. Understandably you want to prevent your mother from making mistakes or getting scammed. You want to protect her from those who might gossip that they also have their doubts about her dating.

Your anxiety about your mother's dating is happening while you and your brother are dealing with your own grief about your dad's death. It's a complex situation for both of you. Keep in mind that your father told her he did not expect her to remain single the rest of her life. It is important to separate and discern what you and your brother are feeling and thinking and why. It will help you respond to your mother more effectively.

You probably heard the axiom that a widow or widower should not make any big decisions within the first year following their partner's death. A widow or widower usually needs the emotional space to reminisce, to honor the memory of their spouse, to reflect on what the marriage meant, and to more deeply adjust to a sense of self without their life partner.

Yet many widows and widowers do feel ready to make important choices and move in new directions before a year has passed. Like

all people, they seek companionship, fun, affection, and a partner. The desire to date and even remarry among widows and widowers over 65 is evidenced by the many senior-focused online dating websites, one of which your mother used.

Though your mother may have teased you about remarrying, studies suggest that only a small percentage of widows and widowers actually do remarry. The more likely outcome is repartnering, by which older adults seek companionship and romance after their loss. Having such a relationship can be seen as adaptive, not foolish, and leads to a greater sense of psychological well-being.

Like so many questions about grief and loss, yours are complicated and have many aspects to consider. Perhaps you and your brother can meet with a bereavement counselor at the hospice that served your parents to better understand your concerns. In the meantime, I encourage you to be kind and gentle to yourself, compassionate to your mother as she seeks new emotional equilibrium, and join with your brother in being the best empathic listeners and supporters your mother can have.

■ **The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, DMin**, an Episcopal priest and psychotherapist, is semi-retired following over 40 years of service as a clergy member, therapist, and hospice-based grief counselor.

Email your questions for the experts to askjourneys@hospicefoundation.org.

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of coffee or go for a walk. And it can't be helpful to not answer the phone when true friends are trying to connect.

"The key thing I always share is that those who are "active" in their response to loss do much better in the short and long term versus those who are "passive" Wolfe told me of his therapy sessions with the bereaved.

We can't really hope to gain by hiding from our losses, trying to run away from them, or not sharing our pain with others when we know we will have to live with those others as we adapt to the new world in which we find ourselves and move into the future.

Try to avoid grieving in harmful ways as you take hold of your life after a major loss. Instead, seek out productive ways to grieve that will help you to cope. Share your grief with those who care about you. If it is helpful, participate in a grief support group or see a therapist who is a grief expert. All of these things can help you adjust to loss and help you live a healthful life.

■ **Charles A. Corr, PhD**, formerly chaired the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement and is recipient of the 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

Moving your body as you grieve

by William G. Hoy

While fully expected in grief, lack of energy is a common complaint among bereaved people. What we consume has an impact on our energy levels in many ways. For example, in needing more energy, we may eat and drink too much sugar and caffeine, causing a burst of activity and an elevated heart rate, only to be followed by exhaustion hours later.

But a major culprit of fatigue for bereaved people is also lack of movement—sometimes because, as we age, we are physically unable to move like we once did. Sometimes, though, it is because grief weighs on us and feels heavy, making the idea of movement seem challenging.

Remember that loss takes a long time for most people to integrate into the rest of their lives, but most find that they gradually have more energy and periods when their thoughts are not completely absorbed with the death of their loved one. When you feel ready, the following suggestions may be useful as you negotiate the grief process:

- Take stock of what you are doing now. Keep an activity diary for a week or so and pay attention to the times of day when you seem to have the most energy. Do you notice how your energy levels relate to your exercise patterns in the 24 hours before? Do you feel better when you have had a week where you have watched your diet and have avoided highly processed foods that often are laden with fat and sugar?
- If you are largely sedentary, start slowly by walking a few hundred steps each day. If able, try parking at the far end of the parking lot when shopping or attending events so that you will walk a few extra steps.

- Find a buddy to walk in the park or an indoor shopping center when the weather is poor. Free cell phone apps, Google and Apple watches, Fitbit trackers, and a variety of other devices can make it easy to set movement goals and stay on track.
- Another proven benefit for bereaved individuals is to join a group engaged in a movement activity— aerobics at a senior center or pickleball hosted by the local recreation department, for example. Many faith communities also have programs designed for adults who have mobility challenges or who have not exercised recently. A hospice in my community has a bereavement walker's group that meets before the shopping center opens each Tuesday morning for coffee, conversation, and a leisurely stroll.

Of course, you will want to consult a healthcare professional before modifying your exercise routine, especially if you have a health condition. If you are already active, keep up the good work. Dancing, many competitive sports such as tennis, help you get a full range of active motion. Being part of a recreation group, health club or sports team has the benefit of helping you connect with others, as well.

Physical exercise is not a cure-all for grief. However, moving your body has a surprisingly beneficial impact on how you move through your experience with loss.

■ **William G. Hoy, DMin, FT**, has walked with thousands of dying and bereaved people through the process of loss throughout the last 40 years. He has recently retired as Clinical Professor of Medical Humanities at Baylor University.

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alternating between these two processes that is healthy. In that oscillation, it is only natural that there will be moments where we experience a sense of progress and even joy.

So, we need to be gentle with ourselves when we have those moments. After all, they are a natural part of the grieving experience. Even more than that, they remind us that, over time, there will be more better days. That gives us the hope to get through those bad days.

■ **Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv**, is Sr. Vice President, Grief Programs, HFA and recipient of the 2019 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Death Education and Counseling.

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JOURNEYS

AUGUST 2024 ISSUE

Journeys is published monthly by the Hospice Foundation of America as a resource for people who are grieving and those who wish to help them.

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