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Chapter One

Our STRONGEST EMOTIONS: Grief and Its Silent Partner, Depression



“Tears are often the telescope by which men see far into heaven.”

—H. W. BEECHER

*H*ave you discovered, as I have, that our emotions upon becoming a widow have an intensity we never experienced before? Grief, loneliness, anger, disappointment—these are not new emotions to us. What took me by surprise was the power, the all-consuming grip, the sudden shock of an emotion rolling over me, literally rendering me unable to function for a moment or sometimes longer. As I searched for help, I discovered many books on grief, some helpful, some not. There were fewer resources on other emotions that were specifically relevant to widows. While these emotions are similar for people who experience other losses, somehow ours is different.

While offering insights and resources on several emotions, I do recognize that these emotions—loneliness, anger, grief, depression—cannot be neatly sorted out, each in its separate compartment. At times they clump together like an army intent on taking us out. At other times we experience one “solo.” We know some facts about our emotions as widows. It’s comforting to know that,

while we don't like the feelings, they are common, to be expected, and indeed normal, considering our loss.

Facts we know about emotions:

- ◆ Our emotions are intense. Why? Two became one and now half of us is ripped away. Every aspect of our life changes, like it or not, ready or not.
- ◆ Our emotions must be acknowledged. Denial is not a healthy permanent option. Admitting what we feel is the beginning of moving forward and being able to make changes in our new life.
- ◆ Our emotions can become empowering and energizing and a positive force as we create a new life. I realize this may be hard to believe if you are in those early months or even years.

So, my dear sister, let's start by looking at grief. From the many widows whose stories I have heard, this is the *first* emotion they face. While loneliness, anxiety, and fear toss us like a splash on the ocean, grief becomes an enveloping storm with wind and waves battering over us. Surprisingly, my lifelines came from other widows who had started the journey before me. Rich with compassion, wise from experience, strong in their resolve, they assured me my grief was normal. We all grieve so differently. I was given permission to be real, which is empowering and the key to survival for us all.

Read on. I trust you will find comfort and healing here.

GRIEF

In spite of the countless books written on grief, I've found it to be the least understood emotion we experience upon losing our dearest companion. My grieving started early as I knew my husband's illness had no cure and would progress to his anticipated death. Being a reader and researcher, I looked for help early. "Anticipatory grief," I discovered was the label for this wave that was sweeping over me while Bob was still here. Even as I audibly heard him tell me he loved me, I felt the ache of grieving inside knowing I would not hear those words much longer. How could I experi-

ence such joy at the words of his tender, baritone voice and feel such pain inside at the same time?

I don't know that discovering a label for my feelings helped, but at least I knew I was not crazy, just grieving early.

If I could find one word to describe why our grief is different from others with loss, it would be this:

FINAL

FINAL FINAL FINAL

Over. No second chance, no future hope, no rewind or replay.

A divorcée may daydream about a reunion. Many hope for some resolution of issues either small or large. A sense of closure or even future friendship with the former spouse might be ahead. Not for the widow.

Having a career go sour, getting fired, or retiring are events that cause people grief. The dashed career could yet morph into something different and productive. The one fired can fantasize that the boss will call back. The retiree is free though days may feel empty. The widow's loss to death is absolutely final. I am not saying our grief is greater than others; simply that it is different.

Much has been written about the stages of grief. The phases in general include initial shock followed by disbelief, then anger, which may move into depression. Finally, on our own timetable, we move into acceptance. What many of us have discovered is that we don't move through the stages in any predictable manner. The grieving process refuses to fit into neat packages. Grief defies the outline. Having talked with many widows, I've learned that we can move forward and then discover ourselves back in disbelief again.

Since that is our reality, I will not talk about stages but rather our experiences in grief. Please know, too, that this is collective wisdom. I am privileged to have women in my new circle of friends who have been on this journey much longer than I. Watching the richness of their lives, I gladly share the insights they have passed on to me.

NO COMPARISON, PLEASE!

Your grief is unique. When we cry, where we cry, what prompts our pain is so, so personal. Please do not compare yourself with another person. We are frequently asked, “How are you doing?” When you are asked that question do you find your mind leaping to another widow? *Am I recovering as fast as she is? If not, what’s wrong with me?*

My dear friend, does anyone know *all* that you are grieving now? Yes, people realize you lost your husband. But do they know that you are also suffering from the loss of future dreams? Do they know the plans you had that will never materialize? Do they know that the 75 percent departure² of your friendship network hurts too? We’ll talk about this at length in chapter 6. Losing our friends in addition to losing our mate results in one shock after another.

If you are a parent, you think of the advice your husband will never offer your children as they go through life’s big passages. You think of marriages, career choices, grandchildren’s events. You will face these life events alone. Please allow yourself to grieve in whatever way and for any amount of time that this emotion floats through your soul.

Grief is a messy emotion. Its face can be tearstained, blank, or a pasted-on smile. Sometimes we camouflage it well. Other times there is no mask stiff enough and large enough to cover the fact that we are engulfed in the moment. How do we get through it? Of the following thoughts, I hope at least some will be helpful.

MOVING THROUGH GRIEF

Be kind to yourself. Sleep in if you need to. You are the one who knows best how to take care of yourself. Curl up in your fuzzy robe and slippers and sip tea. Stop to watch the turtledoves. Take a deep breath. Wander slowly through a park.

Give yourself permission to forget the task at hand. Grieving takes time and work. If we don’t allow ourselves to stop and recall, stop and weep, stop and drink in a memory, we miss a valuable moment of healing and of moving forward. Many of us have jobs, and

we need to negotiate going back to work after our husband's death. Some of us have no choice; others can choose a return time. My contract allowed five working days to grieve for an immediate family member. I'm thankful that a doctor's recommendation gave me a few more days. Some rush back to work for the security of a familiar schedule in their topsy-turvy world.

Write in a journal. If this has already been one of your habits, you may find the volume of what you record increases. My journal became a way I still spoke to Bob. I still wrote my reflections to God, but it became important for me to let Bob know "all that was going on." If you and your husband conversed much, you understand. For those not on this journey, they may not understand that sometimes we talk to our dear mate. I found myself doing this especially while driving. Did other drivers think that this solo woman who was mouthing an animated conversation with no one crazy? My mental response: *Who cares?* If they had known Bob, they'd want to talk to him too!

*Surround yourself
with positive people.
You know who they are.*

Surround yourself with positive people. You know who they are. If you have been a helper and encourager to others in the past, it may be hard for you to *not* make yourself available to those who would drain you at this time. Some people actually seek out those who are grieving. They want to connect to tell them of *their* losses and woes. Maybe later, maybe not at all. But not now. Please know that your emotional tank is already low, and you cannot risk it being drained further by their stories. While grief support groups help some, they are not for everyone. When the program includes going over each person's story, this may be too much for you in the early weeks. For some, the new group of people who understand are their lifeline. Again, you choose.

Be wary of people who want to direct your life. Yes, we are

vulnerable, especially at this time. We have needs. But giving control of our life to another, even temporarily, puts moving forward on hold. We will likely move backward and find it painful to extract ourselves from that relationship in order to begin building our own life.

Give yourself permission to try new things. Visit a place that has no memories. Change your schedule—mealtime, sleep time—discover a comfortable new routine. Eat foods you've never tried before. Look for something on television that is new, curious, interesting, or funny. (I can no longer watch *Cash Cab*, which Bob enjoyed, but *This House Is Worth What?* is intriguing, especially the international version.) Change the daily newspaper you take. I'm now reading the London-based *Financial Times* as my daily news and finding it gives a refreshing worldview compared to its New York-based counterpart.

When it feels right, change the furniture layout in a room.

Follow your own wish on when, how, and whether to dispose of your husband's things. I read a checklist that advised giving away clothing at least by the third month following your loss. (The reason given was that they would soon be out of style and not as useable to others.) Egads! Please! More than one year after my loss, I am still comforted by Bob's closet. However, I know of a person who had to move within two months due to an unmanageable mortgage, so she did not have the luxury of keeping things. We all must do what we must do—without laying guilt on someone else or expecting others to do as we do.

Grief weakens the immune system, so attend to your health. This is a tough one. If you became a widow suddenly, unexpectedly, you may be feeling apathetic about yourself. So much simply does not matter anymore. Maybe you, like me, spent months and years being your mate's primary caregiver. You are tired. I understand. Your weight has changed; you can't remember the last time you called a doctor for *yourself*. I stayed in that "Who cares?" space for several months. Perhaps we are numbed by grief or have no reserve to focus on ourselves as we simply make it through each hour, each day. But I assure you that it feels good when you are able to focus on some exercise that renews your body and your mind. I

chose not to return to running, a decision my knees are grateful for. I stopped when Bob was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It seemed cruel for me to step out our door in running shoes given the diagnosis he had to face. But now I'm lap swimming regularly, something that Bob and I did not do together, and I love it. It's healing to body and mind.

*No two life
journeys are identical.*

It bears repeating that comparing yourself to others is not productive. First, the reasons we grieve are so different. Many are private. Second, we are created so differently as individuals, including the intensity of our emotions. Finally, no two life journeys are identical. Each widow's circumstances will dictate the attention she can devote to moving through grief. My friend Mary found it in her best interests to increase her hours at the hospital to sometimes sixty per week after Brandt's exit to heaven. Some of us as friends were concerned, but we trusted her wisdom. More than thirteen months later, she retired and moved to another state. Along with the move came a new wave of grieving as intense as when her Brandt went to heaven. But her progress through grief was unique to her, and best for her, as was her plan for dealing with it.

So why do we tend to compare one's way of grieving with another's? There's no good reason. Our personalities, health, circumstances, and support systems are unique. Rather than judge, let's grant freedom. Rather than analyze, let's accept. Rather than compare, let's show compassion.

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT GRIEF

The Bible is not silent on the subject of grief; indeed, you'll find many passages of sadness and lament. But here are just two:

First Thessalonians 4:13: *But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope (NRSV).*

We grieve, but when we know heaven is our future there is hope beyond our tears. A phrase I say often these days is, “Heaven is looking better every day.”

Psalm 56:8: *You have kept record of my days of wandering. You have stored my tears in your bottle and counted each of them (CEV).*

God would not collect our tears in a bottle if our grieving were not precious moments with Him.

DEPRESSION

Grief has a silent partner: depression. While they are not universally always partners, for us grief usually arrives first, followed by depression. The statistics on depression and widows are, indeed, depressing. However, as you read this, remember that we are not defined by numbers!

One-third of women upon becoming widows meet the criteria for clinical depression within two months.³ One year later half of those are still clinically depressed. While some people may be surprised by this, I think it is to be expected, considering the magnitude of this event and the nature of depression.

First, may I offer you a definition of depression that may be new to you?

*Depression is a **normal** reaction to loss, crisis, or any traumatic event.*

Psychologists and medical doctors generally agree on observable symptoms. They speak of clinical depression (i.e., when the normal reaction to loss, crisis, or any traumatic event intensifies and the symptoms interfere with normal, productive living), which typically includes:

1. moodiness (or sadness)
2. painful thinking (negative thoughts about self, lack of motivation, indecision)
3. physical symptoms of sleeplessness and loss of appetite

4. anxiety resulting in irritability
5. delusional thinking

Of these five symptoms it seems to me that most are normal, to be expected, and quite appropriate given the immensity of our loss! So here's some good news about depression:

It's normal. (We are not crazy!)

It's manageable. (We will move through it.)

It's treatable. (For some, medical and/or therapeutic assistance is needed and helpful.)

What causes it?

The traumatic event that triggers depression for us is, obviously, the loss of our husband. Our friends and acquaintances know and acknowledge that. What they do not see or know, and what sometimes even takes us by surprise, are the myriad of other losses that accompany no longer having our husband in our life. As we said earlier, our circle of friends, our routine, our social life, and the size of our income change. Our address may change since moving is sometimes necessary or beneficial. Our travel plans, our shared goals, our dreams no longer exist in the same way they used to. The list grows the more we ponder it. In order *not* to experience the symptoms of depression, we would have to be robots!

I have a new friend in her second year of widowhood. She is vivacious, energetic, and to outside appearances parenting her five children splendidly. However, it's hard! Sometimes in her secret moments she says, "Okay, David, it's time for you to show up now. This is too much!"

Would anyone blame her for momentarily thinking, "His plane is just late" or "This has just been an overlong meeting." For those of us who have caught ourselves watching the driveway at 6:15 p.m., we understand. Delusional? No, not given our loss—this is normal.

WHY IS EACH WIDOW'S REACTION UNIQUE?

There is a growing body of research on depression in widows. Given my graduate degree in counseling, I hoped to discover great,

helpful nuggets there. As I read the information, I found that much of the research findings are common sense. Research shows that the incidence and extent of depression depends on the length of our marriage and the quality of that relationship. (Of course!) Women who had had longer, satisfying marriages were more likely to experience depression than those who had been married for fewer years and/or whose marital relationship was not as intimate a bond at best, or troubled and dysfunctional at worst. (Naturally.) I have known women who were contemplating divorce when their husbands became terminally ill. Yes, their recovery from widowhood understandably appeared faster. They were already prepared to give up what they lost.

Research shows that the extent of depression depends in part on a person's physical and mental health at the time of her loss, as well as her network of friends.

We don't move into the trauma of our loss with a blank life slate. Women who have struggled with depression prior to this crisis often are back in the struggle. How did we face crises in our past? Most of us, by this time, have had other traumas to face: postpartum depression, an unexpected, unwanted move, heartbreak over a child's choices, divorce, or the death of others we cared for deeply. How did we move forward?

Healthy recovery *always requires* that we change. When a major life change comes—crisis, trauma, or whatever—we *must* either change to accommodate the new reality or hurt forever.

Those tools we used in the past to move forward positively, given our loss, can be summoned again to help us today. The extent of depression can be affected by using successful tools from our past and developing new ones.

So how do we move through depression? I hope of the following ideas, at least a few will be helpful if depression is your struggle.

Accept the fact that events in real living may result in depression. We are not guaranteed a trauma-free life, and we've been hit by one of the biggest upheavals we'll ever face. Therefore, depression is normal, and there's no need to feel guilty about being normal. Feeling guilty that you are depressed serves no positive

purpose. In my observation, Christians are especially good at feeling guilty about being depressed! Give it up, sister!

When depression waves its flag, pay attention. The symptoms of clinical depression should be addressed. You may be able to address them on your own. If not, seek counsel and/or medical intervention. Many widows find that an antidepressant is helpful for a short period of time when their emotions are interfering with daily living.

Remember what the professionals can and cannot do:

They can

- ◆ Help you identify sources of your problems
- ◆ Help you clarify and see additional choices you can make
- ◆ Validate straight thinking
- ◆ Prescribe medication when appropriate

They cannot

- ◆ Change your circumstances
- ◆ Change or fix your past
- ◆ Create your future
- ◆ Change you

Make adjustments. For example, to remain stuck over worries about reduced income does not fix the problem. I have included a chapter on finances in this book. In addition, there are good books, articles, and Internet information to help you manage the resources you have. We learn, we change, we budget. We can learn to be content with what we have. And grieving our lost friendships does not need to lead to depression. We forgive, let go, and enjoy our smaller social network and a few close friends.

I am not surprised that half of the widows who experience depression are still depressed a year after their loss. Change takes time. No one else can dictate your schedule. There are so many necessary changes. If the adjustment were as easy as cleaning out the refrigerator, we'd all be dancing within a few months.

*Small steps are
better than no steps.*

Address health issues. You'll find this tip for each emotion. Depression seems to be especially connected to other health issues. The hospitalization rate for the recently bereaved is 600 times that of other people.⁴ Facing surgery alone, delayed recovery time due to grief, discombobulated living patterns can all intensify depression. If your "who cares?" attitude is preventing you from addressing a health issue, enlist a friend as your support system or accountability partner. Encourage each other with weight goals or daily walking. Small steps are better than no steps. Celebrate and enjoy each accomplishment. God values our bodies. They are important enough to Him that each is an original. We only get one. We can replace some parts, but not the whole thing—in this life.

A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE ON DEPRESSION

First Kings 19 describes behavior by Elijah that meets the criteria for clinical depression. God attended to his physical needs and gave him a new purpose in life. God did not ignore or condemn Elijah's feelings, and He does not ignore or condemn ours. He moves with us and in us, through them. God continued to use Elijah after his season of despair.

Read Lamentations 3:19–25. Depression need not consume us. You'll see that God is always compassionate and gives us a new morning. The new morning is not just the sun rising the next day—it is the new and fresh opportunity that comes with change.

Yes, we may fall in the crisis, as Psalm 145:14–19 acknowledges, but we do not stay down. Our Lord takes our hand when we are down and lifts us up.

We see that it is God's habit to be real with His people where they are. Thank God for that! We really don't need platitudes or superficial stuff on our journey through grief or depression.

He walks with us on our journey whether we sense His presence or not. Psalm 118:6 tells us that "The Lord is with me; I will

not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

He offers us a new day in which the necessity of making different choices becomes the opportunity to change. Psalm 118:24 encourages us to remember that “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

He lifts our chin, takes our hand, and guides our steps. We are not alone.