

FINDING HOPE

After The Death Of Your Husband



Jason Troyer, PhD

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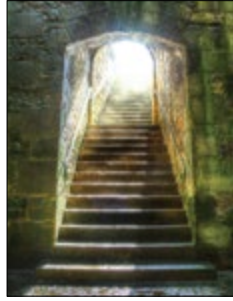
Jason Troyer, PhD

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Finding Hope

After the Death of Your Husband

By Jason Troyer, PhD



To the reader,

I can't express how sorry I am for your loss. Most women find the death of their husband, even if it was expected, to be one of the most difficult events of their lives.

I wrote this booklet to provide you with comfort, hope, and information following the death of your husband. I have included information about common grief reactions and responses, strategies for helping yourself, and other topics. You can find even more information listed on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

I hope this booklet will be helpful to you as you mourn the death of your husband.

Sincerely,

JASON TROYER, PHD

www.GriefPlan.com

Finding Hope After the Death of Your Husband
Jason Troyer

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This book is not designed to replace information from a mental health professional or a physician. The reader should consult an appropriate professional in matters relating to his or her physical and emotional health.

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Helen's Story

This brief story is a combination of several widows' experiences. I'm sharing it with you as an example of some of the reactions you may be experiencing. All of Helen's reactions and responses are completely normal following the death of a spouse.

Helen and Robert met while they were still in high school; they were both 17 years old. After dating for 2 years, they were married in their hometown. Like most couples, they had their share of ups and downs. Robert was out of work for a while after his business closed. Helen survived cancer. Their four children each went through a wild stage. While their relationship wasn't perfect, they had always supported each other during the difficult times. That was why Helen wasn't sure what she would do after Robert died.

Even though Robert was in his late 70s, Helen was surprised when she received a call that Robert had suffered a heart attack while having breakfast with his friends. She felt as though she was in a cloud — she couldn't quite believe that she wasn't having a nightmare until she saw Robert's body at the funeral home. While planning the funeral service, Helen made specific choices about what she wanted to have happen. For example, she wanted her sons and grandchildren to be the pallbearers. She liked the idea of Robert being cared for by his family up to the very end. She ordered flower displays with lots of carnations — that was the flower he always bought for her while they were scrimping every penny.

Helen had a visitation and a funeral service for Robert. She was initially dreading these events. However, Helen learned so many new things about Robert at both events. It was still difficult to talk about her husband, but it was important to see that her husband had been an important part of so many peoples' lives and they would always remember him — just like she would always remember him.

The night before the funeral Helen had a dream about Robert and it felt so real — like he was alive again. But when she awoke,

she remembered the reality of the situation. Sitting in the funeral service made Robert’s death seem so final. Helen knew she would have to face this new reality, but everything seemed to be happening so quickly.

One thing that troubled Helen about the funeral service was that she didn’t cry. She had cried at several points during the planning of the service and at the visitation, but she felt as though she was in a fog during the funeral service. Helen wondered what others would think of her — would they think she didn’t love her husband? Afterwards several of her friends remarked on how “strong” Helen had been during the funeral. Helen didn’t feel strong. In fact, she felt like she had somehow betrayed her husband by not showing more emotion. She missed him terribly.

One particularly meaningful part of the funeral service was when her oldest son shared stories about Robert. He told a joke about a man who was always late. Everyone, including Helen, laughed — Robert could never get anywhere on time. Helen thought about how good it felt to laugh, but then felt guilty about laughing during her husband’s funeral.

After the funeral, Helen faced many new challenges. She had to sign lots of documents and deal with numerous financial and



legal matters. Her oldest son assisted her with this and they were fortunate to have a trusted attorney to help with the more complicated legal issues. It helped to have her sister and her children around during the first week because Helen found it so difficult to concentrate on anything. Helen was often distracted during the business and legal meetings and could not even seem to follow a television program.

Some of the biggest challenges Helen faced were the day-to-day experiences when she was reminded that Robert had died. For example, a few days after the funeral Helen walked into the grocery store to get milk. She picked up a half-gallon of whole milk and then stopped. It had been an ongoing argument between Helen and Robert — he enjoyed whole milk while Helen had thought they should switch to skim milk to be healthier. They finally compromised and each of them always got his or her preferred milk. Helen realized there was no reason for her to get whole milk anymore. Helen felt the tears on her face as she stood in the dairy aisle holding the carton of whole milk. “I must be losing it,” she thought to herself. “After all, who cries over milk?” She also found herself feeling angry at her husband. She often told him to eat healthier food and to see his doctor more often. She wondered if he might still be alive if he had taken better care of himself, and she felt guilty that she hadn’t forced him to live a healthier lifestyle.

Helen experienced many of these “first moments” — like when she heard the phone ring and she almost called out to Robert to answer it because she was in the middle of rolling out cookie dough. Another first was when she realized the car needed its oil changed — Robert had always taken care of the car maintenance.

Helen found there were consistent times during the day when she felt especially lonely. She found herself missing Robert in the morning — they had always awakened at the same time and had breakfast together. She also found the house was so quiet in the hour before going to bed. During these times she felt particularly alone.

During the first several weeks after Robert's death Helen had many appointments at the bank and lawyer's office. She also had many visits from her friends and her children and grandchildren. Sometimes she enjoyed these visits while other times they were exhausting. But the visits slowed down after a couple of weeks. About three months after the funeral Helen found that she was still missing Robert desperately, but everyone else seemed to have moved on. Helen felt especially lonely and sad during this time. She began to wonder why she wasn't getting over her grief more quickly and if she was doing something wrong.

To see how Helen deals with these adjustments and her grief, read the Epilogue.



Common Grief Reactions

You may have a wide variety of reactions over the weeks, months, and years following your spouse's death. Here are several common grief reactions following the death of a spouse.

- Sadness & Crying
- Guilt & Self Blame
- Helplessness & Shock
- Loneliness & Yearning
- Anger & Irritability
- Fatigue & Lack of Energy
- Insomnia & Restlessness
- Forgetful & Absentminded
- Lack of appetite
- Dreams about the deceased
- Regret
- Relief

Normal Grief Reactions following the Death of a Husband

Shock: Other than sadness, shock is one of the most common reactions following the death of a loved one. Many widows go through a period of shock after learning their spouse has died. This shock may last a few hours or several weeks, and it is a normal reaction unless it lasts for more than several weeks. Many people don't cry when they are in this state of shock. This can be troubling because some widows feel they are not honoring their deceased husband when they don't cry. Let me assure you that not crying in the days and weeks following your loss does not mean that you didn't love your husband. Do not belittle or ridicule yourself if you have been unable to cry. It is common for widows to be busy with taking care of their extended family, planning the funeral, and dealing with legal matters; widows may not have had time to fully experience the loss of their husband.

Disbelief: After being married for many years, it is normal that it will take your mind a while to fully understand that your husband has died. Most widows experience frequent "disbelief" reactions that are a normal part of the early grief process. These moments of disbelief occur in small ways several times a day. For example, you may hear your phone ring and momentarily think, "That's my husband calling" before remembering he is gone. Or you may wake up in the morning and reach across the bed as you've done a thousand times only to find he isn't laying there. These are normal reactions to the death of a loved one, and they may happen for many months after your husband's death. After all, many widows developed patterns and habits with their husbands that were part of a decades-long marriage. It is completely understandable that it would take time to get used to him not being around.

Avoidance: You may find that you want to avoid thinking about your husband and his death. This is also normal. It is unhealthy and unhelpful to either constantly think about your husband or to

always avoid thinking about him. It is normal and healthy to take breaks from your grief. You deserve to have time to focus on yourself, your other loved ones, and the practical challenges that you now face. It does not mean you love your husband less, and it does not mean you are grieving incorrectly.

Guilt & Anger: Guilt is also a frequent reaction following the death



of a spouse. Widowed persons often ask themselves questions such as “What if ...?” “If I had only ...” and “Why didn’t I ...?” These questions are very common and normal. There was likely nothing you could have done to prevent your husband’s death. Even if you had forced him to go to a physician’s appointment or asked him not to leave the house that day, or encouraged him to have a healthier

lifestyle — none of these things would have guaranteed the outcome would be different.

You may also find yourself feeling more angry and irritable than usual. When a loved one dies, sometimes we’d like to think there is someone who should be at fault. This may be especially true when the death is sudden, unexpected, or involves an accident or intentional harm. Of course in some cases, like a negligent surgeon or a drunk driver, your anger will be completely justified.

But perhaps the most important questions are: What is the anger doing for you? What purpose is it serving? Anger can be helpful. It may drive you to make changes like starting a charity in your husband’s name or getting a law changed. But anger can only help at the beginning of these changes. It cannot be used to maintain these causes because anger is too destructive to the survivor if it is maintained over a long time. Anger can only be healing if it is transformed into a desire to help others; eventually charity, grace, and altruism must replace anger as the primary motivators.

Some widows are afraid to give up their guilt and anger. They mistakenly assume that if they are no longer experiencing guilt or anger, then they will begin to forget or dishonor their husbands. This simply isn't true. You can continue to honor and remember your husband without the self-destructive effects of long-term guilt and anger. After all, if your husband could talk to you, would he want you to live the rest of your life consumed with guilt and anger? Or would he want you to remember and honor him, but also enjoy your remaining years?

Relief: There are two common situations where widows may feel relief following the death of their husbands: when the widow was a caregiver or when the relationship was troubled. You may have been caregiving for your husband for weeks, months, or years while he was ill. In these situations it is normal to experience relief — both that your husband is no longer suffering and that you are no longer required to perform caregiving tasks. Some widows experience guilt in association with this relief. They convince themselves they are being selfish for being released from their caregiving role and believe they should not experience any sense of relief. As mentioned in the section on guilt and anger, try to recognize that your husband would not want you to be consumed with guilt. After all, he has been released from his pain and illness and you should be released from your caregiving duties. This does not mean you don't love your husband or honor your relationship.

The other situation where you may feel relief is when your marriage was troubled and conflicted. Although we are taught not to speak ill of the deceased, the reality of the situation may be that your husband had numerous faults. You may have loved him as a person, but not liked some of his behaviors. To make things more difficult, others may not have known about your husband's faults, and they may speak of him as being more admirable than he really was. In these situations, it can be incredibly helpful to find a trusted friend or professional you can confide in.

Should I Get Professional Help?

First, you should always seek professional assistance if you think it would be helpful to you. You certainly don't have to be "crazy" or mentally ill to benefit from grief counseling or a support group. Mental health professionals can provide an unbiased perspective and can help you develop strategies for becoming "unstuck" in your grief. Grief counseling is not a magic potion or a cure for your grief; you won't walk out of your sessions feeling as though your grief has disappeared. But professional assistance can help you better understand your grief and can provide a safe environment for talking about your concerns.



Signs You May Need Professional Help

- You feel that you are "stuck" in your grief in some way
- Your grief has not lessened (or has gotten worse) after several months or a year
- Your feelings of guilt and/or anger have not diminished
- You can't say your husband's name or you won't allow others to talk about him
- You experience grief, depression, and/or anxiety that impairs your ability to take care of yourself, be effective in your work, or maintain your relationships with others
- You experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide (Always seek help in these situations)
- Your use of alcohol, medications, or illegal substances impairs your ability to be a fully-functioning person

**All of these signs (with the exceptions of thoughts of self-harm or substance abuse) refer to your situation several months after the loss — not immediately after your husband's death*

Common Questions About Grief

What About the Stages of Grief?

The most widely known theory of grief is Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Stages of Grief. Many people assume that her stages (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) are the "right" way to grieve but this is incorrect. Research and professional experience support the view that grief reactions are very individualized — they do not follow one pattern. So don't be worried if you don't feel angry or if you don't experience denial. Each person's process of grief is unique, and you shouldn't try to match your reactions to any specific stage of grief.

How Long Should Grief Last?

Many people expect grief to be something you "get over" in a matter of weeks. In fact, your grief may last a year or more and many feel grief even longer than that. Most widows find their grief eventually lessens, but also feel that a part of them is always grieving the loss of their spouse.

Although most widows report they are feeling better 1 to 2 years after their loss, this does not mean that grief necessarily follows a pattern of improving each day. Some researchers have found that grief may peak between 4-8 months following the death. One possible reason for this is widows are often well-supported during the first few weeks after their husbands' deaths, but the support eventually declines after a month or two. However, the widow continues to feel the grief intensely, but has much less support than before. Indeed, many well-meaning friends and family members may suggest that your grief should be over within a few months. This simply is not true.

Furthermore, many widows report "grief bursts" — moments or days when their grief is especially painful. These bursts of grief may be due to significant days (e.g., husband's birthday, wedding anniversary, holidays, etc.) or random reminders of your husband.

These “bad days” can also be a result of a new realization or a new “first.” For example, you may feel the pain of your loss when your grandchild graduates and your husband isn’t there to see it. These reminders may even seem silly to you and others — perhaps his favorite football team finally wins a championship and you find yourself upset that he didn’t witness it. Grief bursts are a normal, although painful, part of grief. Most importantly, experiencing them does not mean that you are regressing or that you are not grieving correctly.

How Do I Achieve Closure or Resolution?

One of the most common questions I get is “How do I get



closure?” I have to admit, I don’t like the term “closure.” I worry that widows who think they should have closure assume the goal of grief is to never again feel sadness or pain about their husband’s death. A more reasonable

goal is to get to the point where you are not feeling intense pain every time you think about your husband.

Grief doesn’t get wrapped up. It changes, it evolves, but important losses are life-changing events. We don’t ask newlyweds how quickly they get back to the way they were before getting married; we don’t expect new parents to get back to the way things were before they had their first child. Why do we assume we will “get back to” life as it was before the death of a spouse? Life will never be like it was before — no matter how much time elapses. Hopefully the loss won’t be as intense as it first was, but it is important to accept that life will always be different.

Is There a “Right” Way to Grieve?

HEART GRIEVERS & HEAD GRIEVERS

There are lots of assumptions about the “best” way to grieve. For many years, most people (including psychologists) assumed the only way to grieve was to express feelings of loss through crying and talking. More recently, grief experts have begun to rethink this assumption. In fact, many individuals adapt well by using other methods.

I believe (and recent research supports) there is no one correct way to grieve. There are some common responses, but grief is highly personal and unique. One view of grief that I support is the idea that there are two general styles of grieving: “heart grievers” and “head grievers.” Both ways of expressing grief can be normal and healthy. Heart grievers find comfort in sharing their feelings with others, experience grief very intensely, and express their loss through tears. Many women (but not all) tend to be heart grievers. Conversely, head grievers express their grief through their thoughts and actions, are uneasy crying in front of others, and often focus on solving the problems associated with their loss¹. For example, a head griever may express her grief through taking an active role in planning the funeral, channeling her grief into physical exercise, spending time alone thinking about her husband, and choosing specific times when she feels comfortable to express her feelings. Not surprisingly, men are more likely to be head grievers, but a significant number of women also identify with this style. I should note that few people fall completely into one category or the other, and some people will feel comfortable with both styles (heart and head) Therefore, based on this view of grieving styles, the best way to grieve is to follow your own natural style: heart or head.

¹ *The concepts of heart and head grievers are based on Ken Doka and Terry Martin’s concepts of instrumental and intuitive grief styles. See their book, Grieving Beyond Gender, for more information.*

Do I Have to Forget My Husband?

There is a longstanding grief myth that it is necessary to eventually “let go” or forget the deceased. We now know that this is not a healthy and adaptive way to grieve. Instead, it is healthy and normal to maintain some “continuing bonds” with your husband after his death². These bonds may include thinking and dreaming about him, talking to him and about him, visiting a gravesite or special place, and other ways of feeling connected to him. I believe these different ways of honoring and remembering your husband can be an important part of the grief process, as long as you balance them with continuing to love those who are still living.

²For more on this see the book *Continuing Bonds* by Klass, Silverman, and Nickman.



Helping Yourself: Practical Strategies

Be Gentle with Yourself

Give yourself at least as much patience and grace as you would give to a friend or loved one who had suffered the loss of a loved one. We are often much kinder to others than we are with ourselves.

Be Open to Opportunities

Many widowed persons are hesitant to be a “third wheel” and turn down opportunities to socialize with others. I would encourage you to accept offers to socialize and dine with others, if you feel like doing so.

Take Care of Yourself

Be sure to eat healthy, exercise, and take care of your physical health. It is common to feel a strange combination of exhaustion and nervous energy, yet also have difficulty falling and staying

asleep. Eating well and exercise can help drain some of this restlessness and may help you sleep better.

Express Yourself

It can be helpful to express yourself through creative hobbies or activities. Some examples include sewing, quilting, woodworking, painting, writing poetry, singing, writing stories, or playing an instrument.



Share your Thoughts and Feelings

Setting aside time and space when you feel comfortable talking with others can be incredibly helpful. This may involve talking with a trusted friend or family member, a clergy person, or a therapist. You may want someone to simply listen or to help you solve problems. The nature of these conversations may be different if you are a heart or head griever (see *Common Questions about Grief* section), but regardless of your grieving style, it can be helpful to gain another person's perspective and support.

Read Books about Other Widows' Responses to Grief

The death of a husband can be very isolating. You may not know many other widows, or you may not feel comfortable talking with others. It can be helpful to read about how other widows have dealt with the death of their husbands. Books written by widows can help you feel less lonely and can provide guidance about how to adjust to life without your husband. I have reviewed numerous books by widows on my website: www.GriefPlan.com.

Engage in Meaningful Rituals and Activities

Many widowed persons find it helpful to create meaningful habits and activities. These actions can be large or small, public or private, and symbolize your relationship with your husband. For example, you may find comfort in going to the cemetery to visit your husband. You might decide to donate money in your husband's name to his favorite charity or organization. Taking care of his special garden plot might be your way to feel connected to him. More examples of these types of activities are listed in the next section.



Honoring & Remembering Your Husband

There are many different ways to honor and remember your husband. The best ways are those that are meaningful to you and your loved ones. Think about what was important to your husband. What organizations and activities was he committed to? How can you help others remember his contributions and his legacy? But most importantly, what would be helpful for you as you grieve your husband? Below are some ideas to help you begin thinking creatively about ways to honor and remember your husband.

WAYS TO HONOR AND REMEMBER YOUR HUSBAND

1) *Create a photo album, scrapbook, memory book, video montage, or other visual way to remember your husband.*

Creating a visual reminder of your husband and your life together can be a wonderful way to honor him and your marriage. Many widows find great comfort in reviewing pictures of their husbands as a way to remember the happy and important moments of life.

2) *Volunteer for or contribute to an organization whose mission you support.*

Many grieving people find it necessary to do something active as part of their grief response. They feel the need to “do something.” Volunteering at an organization that was meaningful to your husband or donating money to a cause he cared about can be a way to honor his legacy.

3) *Keep a special reminder with you.*

You may feel extremely lonely after your husband dies. This is a



natural reaction; most widows were constant companions with their husbands. It may help you to carry something that reminds you of your husband. For example, you might carry a picture of your husband, a significant piece of jewelry (e.g., wedding ring, a special necklace or earrings, etc.), or something else of significance as a way to continue to feel close to your husband. Let me assure you

that there is nothing pathological or unhealthy about doing this.

4) *Ongoing Rituals and Moments of Significance.*

There are many ways that you can continue to feel connected to your husband. Examples of daily, weekly, or monthly rituals include saying “good morning” to your husband’s picture as you get ready for the day, including him in your daily prayers, visiting his gravesite or other important location on a regular basis, and many other possibilities. Just as your relationship with your husband was built upon many daily interactions, so too can your connection be maintained with small, but significant moments of remembrance.

Epilogue: Helen's Story

This is a continuation of Helen's story from the beginning of the booklet. At the end I discuss how all of Helen's reactions are normal responses to the death of her husband.

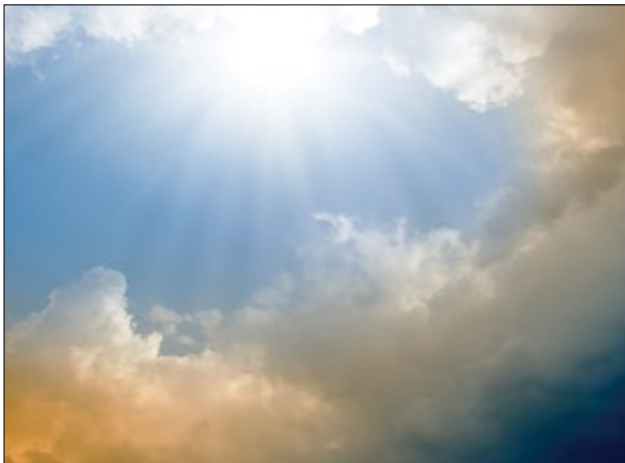
Over the next several months Helen began to make some adjustments to her schedule and activities. Many of these were small changes, but each helped her in its own way. Because she felt particularly lonely in the mornings, Helen joined an exercise class three mornings a week. She met some new people her own age and she would often join them for coffee after the class. Some of her classmates were also widowed, and it helped to hear how they had made adjustments in their lives.

Like many widowed people, she worried that she would forget all the wonderful things about her husband and their life together. She decided to put together a scrapbook that included pictures and memories that spanned their entire relationship. It was something she had planned to do for a long time. It felt good to share her progress on the scrapbook with her children and grandchildren and tell them stories about her husband. Helen also decided to set up a small scholarship at the college where Robert had graduated. Helen knew Robert would enjoy the thought of helping students from his hometown further their education.

Although she hadn't told anyone, Helen made occasional visits to Robert's grave. She would bring him carnations and, if no one was around, she would talk to him. Helen updated Robert on their children and grandchildren and their activities and accomplishments. She would talk about decisions she had made and would tell him how much she missed him. One time she even chided him about his avoidance of doctors and his unhealthy eating habits. She just felt that she had to express her frustrations in some way.

About nine months after Robert's death, Helen found that most of her memories about Robert were happy ones. There were certainly times when she still cried and missed him terribly. She was a little worried that she would be facing her first Christmas season without Robert, but she had talked about it with her children and they were making adjustments to help incorporate Robert's memory into their celebration.

Helen also found that she had grown quite a bit since Robert's death. She had become more outgoing and joined several social clubs and organizations. She had also learned to manage many of the tasks that Robert had always completed for her. For example, she learned how to file their taxes and she was no longer intimidated when she walked into the auto parts store. While she would trade all of this for having Robert back, she knew that wasn't possible and she was determined to regain some control of her life. She had finally reached the point where she could think about her past with more joy than pain, and she could consider the future with a sense of hope.



Helen's Story: Dr. Troyer's Commentary

All of Helen's reactions to her husband's death were normal responses. I'll comment on several specific reactions:

- It is normal to be in a state of shock and disbelief after hearing about your husband's death. This can even happen if you are present for your husband's death.
- Most people have difficulty concentrating or focusing after the death of a loved one. It can be difficult to sustain a train of thought or follow conversations.
- Many widows go through periods when they don't cry. Helen may have felt guilty that she didn't cry at her husband's funeral, but this does not mean she didn't love her spouse.
- It is normal to feel a wide range of emotions and reactions during grief — including laughter. Don't feel guilty if you laugh while you are grieving. Telling humorous stories about the deceased can be a great way to honor them and take a break from intense sadness.
- Vivid dreams and even more unusual experiences are common and normal. Some studies suggest that approximately half of all widowed adults experience some unexplained and/or vivid experiences.
- Although no one looks forward to a funeral or a visitation, many people (like Helen) find that these events can be an opportunity to learn about their loved one from others, express their sadness, and share the legacy of the deceased.
- Like Helen with the milk in the grocery store, all bereaved spouses will experience random moments when they feel the pain of their loss. These moments are often impossible to predict, but they are a normal part of grief.

- In addition to feeling sadness, Helen was frustrated with her husband. Whatever the reason, it is common to be frustrated or even angry with the deceased. Most widows don't think they can talk about their frustration for fear they will be viewed as uncaring. In Helen's case, she was able to express her frustration during her private visits to Robert's grave.
- Many widowed people find there are specific times of day and days of the week when they especially miss their spouse. It can be helpful to identify these times and create new activities or patterns — like Helen did when she attended the morning exercise class. I am not suggesting you try to stay so busy that you never think about your spouse, but new activities and patterns can reduce your feelings of loneliness.
- There are many things you can do to honor your husband's memory. Helen decided to set up a scholarship in Robert's name and create a memory album. For other examples see "Ways to Honor and Remember your Husband."
- Helen visited Robert's grave and would talk to him as if he were there. This is a very common and normal thing to do. It can help you feel like your husband is still a part of your life.

A Final Word of Hope

While no words can take away your grief, I hope this booklet has provided you with information and comfort. I want to remind you that grief takes many different forms and it may resurface at seemingly random times. In addition to these moments of pain, you will eventually have unexpected pleasant memories. For example, you may smile whenever you see an Oldsmobile because it reminds you of your first date with your husband. For most people the ache of grief does lessen over time.

My hope is that you are surrounded by supportive loved ones as you grieve the death of your husband and that eventually your happy memories endure longer than the sad ones.

With sincerest condolences,

JASON TROYER, PHD

www.GriefPlan.com



About the Author



Dr. Jason Troyer is the creator of [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com). In his professional experience as a therapist, grief researcher, and professor, he discovered that grieving people wanted a plan to help them on their grief journey. His GriefPlan Programs include videos, information, activities, writing prompts, and other tools to guide people to heal, remember, and rebuild after loss. Dr. Troyer also offers 1-on-1 GriefPlan Coaching for those who want additional help. He provides engaging presentations and workshops on a variety of grief-related topics. Dr. Troyer earned his doctorate in Counseling Psychology and masters in Counseling. You can contact Dr. Troyer at [GriefPlan.com](https://www.griefplan.com).

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Heal • Remember • Rebuild

With Dr. Jason Troyer



Feeling Lost & Stuck in Your Grief?



I guide you through a plan to heal, remember, & rebuild after loss

- **Free Videos & Resources**
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