The Widow’s Biggest Battle: Loneliness

According to a recent poll on www.widowspath.com, the biggest issue facing widows is loneliness. Loneliness can be a painful and prolonged experience for those who grieve. The quiet in a home of two people is much, much different than the quiet found when we are alone, very often for the first time in our adult lives. Some widows speak of the loneliness caused by losing their best friend. For a number of widows their spouse was their financial planner and support. For other widows their spouse was their business partner. Several tell of missing their spouse as the father of their children and how their feelings of loneliness are increased as a result of being a single parent. Likely it is a combination of these and many other holes that make a widow feel lonely. There is a huge void in a widow's life and in her heart.

Loneliness has been described as seeing the world in tones of gray rather than in full color. The heart of loneliness can feel either raw like an open wound or it can feel numb and almost dead. For widows their world without their spouse can appear as a vast and empty black hole.

Loneliness is a very complex, multidimensional phenomenon. Today’s psychologists accept that loneliness must be seen as an interior, subjective experience, not an external, objective condition. Loneliness is not synonymous with being alone, nor does being with others guarantee protection from feelings of loneliness. The loneliness of a widow who just lost her husband very is different from the loneliness of a boy who is sick in bed and can’t go outside to play, or a teen stood up for a date. And just as there is no one type of loneliness, there is no one solution to reverse it.

In an effort to simplify things here, there are two generalized types of loneliness: emotional and social. Emotional loneliness is derived from attachment theory. For the widow, this means that her emotional loneliness is caused by the lack of a partner. Furthermore, attachment theory denies that supportive friends can compensate the loss of an “attachment figure.” Consequently, feelings of emotional loneliness can persist until the widow finds another romantic partner.

Social loneliness, on the other hand, is the loneliness one experiences because of the lack of a wider social network--one who does not feel like they are a member of their community and/or does not have close friends or family to rely on in times of distress. A person can be either emotionally or socially lonely, or both. The widow’s loneliness most often relates to the former, though social loneliness is likely also experienced as the widow’s relationship status has changed. It is easier to reverse, however, and therefore not usually long-term.

Ironically, the emotional loneliness of grief frequently moves the griever into frantic activity, often social in nature. This activity can manifest in various forms; some widows explore new activities or volunteer work, some throw themselves into their job or look for a new job, while others take classes or travel. These activities are viable options to help one move on with life after a loss (and also reduce social loneliness), but they can become distractions from dealing with the pain of emotional loneliness.

In theory, the opposite of lonely is accompanied (think companionship, togetherness and friendship). Though it does make sense that by filling her time with social activities the widow would be on her way to breaking out of her state of loneliness, the widow’s loneliness is more specifically a loss of intimate connection between hearts and minds; the opposite of her loneliness is intimacy.
Intimacy—really knowing, understanding and honoring another person—is what the widow is missing after the death of her spouse. That beautiful bond with another human being that allows you to completely be yourself, knowing that no matter what you say or share, the other person will love you. Intimacy does not come from sharing physical space with someone; instead it comes from sharing mental, spiritual and emotional space. Unfortunately, this is not easily recreated, nor the loneliness caused by lacking it easily taken away.

While it is obvious that finding intimate connection with another human being is rare and at best a process that takes time, there are, however, several things a widow can do to better manage her overall feelings of loneliness:

- **Analyze who in your daily life you can possibly connect to.** Is there an acquaintance who has a similar routine to yours? Someone local you could walk with before or after work? Think about the places you go, your responsibilities, and who matches your life circumstances. This might entail going out of your comfort zone and approaching a new neighbor, or inviting a workmate out to lunch. Reaching out could open a new world of relationships and chances for connection.

- **Form stronger bonds with the people you already know.** Find a way to connect and share emotions. Tell them about your secrets and listen to theirs. Spend time truly getting to know the people you are already friends with. Work on taking your relationships to a higher level.

- **Quality trumps quantity.** Having two intimate friends is better than having one hundred friends whom you barely know. The number of friends you have has no effect on loneliness. You can have dozens of friends and still feel lonely. True intimacy and feelings of relatedness are much more about the quality of your relationships than the quantity.

- **Try to find something common between you and your friends (such as a hobby) then do it together.** Approach a potential work out buddy at the gym. Shared interests will positively strengthen the bonds between you and others.

- **Focus on giving.** Is there a neighbor, friend, or relative who needs something you are able to offer? You might also reach out and help a person who is possibly feeling lonely, too. Call them, write a card, drop by with a gift, or invite them out for coffee. Even if your offer is not accepted, think of it as a random act of kindness and don’t be afraid to try again.

- **Be socially proactive.** Often times one becomes the maker of plans rather than on the receiving end of invitations. It seems wise to accept this; it makes no sense to let pride stand in the way of finding company when it is needed.

  *Remember, if you increase your social activity this not only lowers feelings of social loneliness but opens oneself up to opportunities that could grow into relationships that can in time lessen your emotional loneliness.*

- **Get a pet.** Studies and surveys indicate that the presence of animal companions can ease feelings of loneliness. Beyond the companionship the animal itself provides, there may also be increased opportunities for socializing with other pet owners.

- **Learn to enjoy being by yourself.** Use your time alone as a way to rediscover activities you like and parts of yourself you may have forgotten about. Read, watch funny movies, journal, write a story, a play, learn to paint, plant some flowers, go the library and explore a topic that has interested you for a long time, take a walk down Main Street then sit in a coffee shop or on a bench and people
Spending time alone does not have to be synonymous with loneliness. It is an opportunity to change your life by listening to your intuition and seeing what happens as you experience your life without distraction.

Embracing Solitude

Solitude is being alone without feeling lonely. Often called sanctuary, people are more productive when in solitude since they can reflect on certain portions of their lives and solve personal issues. Creative people take solitude as the time to release thoughts and emotions through journal entries, poems, paintings or any activity that their passions dictate to them. More often than not, people end up feeling refreshed after a period of solitude. Solitude can also be a vehicle for spiritual growth, an objective common to all religions.

Solitude can have real positive effect on individuals. If we remember that grief is also about the loss of a sense of self, not just the widow’s loss of her spouse, then periods of solitude can provide a grieving spouse an opportunity to rediscover her own identity again. When a person feels comfortable in his or her own skin, he/she is more likely to be healthy and independent.

Perhaps the first step a widow can take to push loneliness away is to not fear being alone. As a society we tend to equate being alone with being rejected and alienated. Why are human beings afraid to be alone with ourselves? There is nothing wrong with striving to make connections with other people; we are social animals after all. So perhaps in addition to seeking a sense of belonging in the outside world, the widow should look inward and transform her fear of loneliness into an appreciation of, or maybe even an enjoyment of, solitude.

Life cannot again be the same after one loses a spouse, but it can be enjoyed and treasured. Understanding social and emotional loneliness and having tools to alleviate the associated feelings, enhancing one’s social networks, and using solitude as a time for growth and reflection can help the widow find a balanced existence once again. With time she will carve out a clear and comforting path to not only contentment, but to happiness.