

# WOMANNEWS™

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## Among the widowed, shared sorrow is a special gift

By Marya Smith  
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**I** felt the wind was knocked out of me for months after my husband died of cancer," recalls Mary Obey, 54, of Palatine, who was widowed seven years ago. "I was preoccupied. My attention span was not good. I just needed someone to listen. "But people expected me to pick up the pieces and go on. Friends and family want you to be OK, so you don't tell them what you're feeling. Yet I was devastated. I had lost my best friend. I thought I

was going crazy."

Many widows and widowers echo Obey's experience, saying they are seldom able to express the worries and feelings surrounding their grief to family members, friends, co-workers or professionals.

"Friends say, 'It's been six months; aren't you over it yet?' Grief makes people uncomfortable," says Rev. Peg Schultz, chaplain at Loyola University Medical Center in Maywood and a widow for less than two years. "But it's important to allow someone to cry, to honor their tears."

Widows and widowers are discovering a place

where their fears, and their pain, are understood: in support groups with other widowed persons.

Traditionally the domain of churches and synagogues, bereavement support is found increasingly in hospices, hospitals and funeral homes. Support groups for those who have lost a spouse take many forms, including weekend retreats, four-to-eight-week workshops and ongoing mutual support sessions.

Bereavement support groups are not therapy. Sometimes there are speakers, information sheets, discussion topics, books. But primarily, the groups

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allow widows and widowers to talk, listen and cry without worrying that they will be judged or criticized.

Support groups are "a place where grief can be understood," says Rev. Dick Augspurger, executive director of the Institute for Living Pastoral Counseling Center in Winnetka and chaplain for the Chicago North Shore chapter of They Help Each Other Spiritually (THEOS), a Pittsburgh-based organization that sponsors mutual-help groups for the widowed across the country.

Four months after her husband died, Obey took part in her first support group for the widowed.

"When I walked through that door, I would take off the mask and tell how it really was; I've found that reaching out to others in their pain helps me with mine," says Obey, who is now a volunteer coordinator for Begin Again, a support group for the widowed at Northwest Community Hospital in Arlington Heights.

Obey, along with many others who have lost a spouse, agrees with support-group veteran Maggie McNamara, a Skokie widow of four years, who says, "The only person who can say 'I understand how you feel' is someone who's been through it."

"Research shows that grieving persons are best helped not by a counselor or clergyman, but by another person who has suffered a similar loss and accommodated to it," says Anne Studner, senior program specialist of the Widowed Persons Service, a division of the Association of Retired Persons in Washington which develops volunteer-run support groups and outreach programs for the widowed nationwide.

"I didn't want to hear another professional," says Tony Roback, 62, of Skokie, who has been a widower for four years. "I had been through doctoring, listening to professionals in the last days of my wife's life. It was nice to be with people who had been through it. Support groups are people to people."

And most often, women to women.

In 1992, there were 13,853,000 widowed people in the United States, and more than 11 million of them were widows, according to Helena Lopata, professor of sociology at Loyola University in Chicago and author of "Women as Widows: Support Systems" (Elsevier, 1980). Close to 78 percent of U.S. widows are age 55 and older, Lopata says.

"Widows are in shock because their whole life has changed," says Charlotte Hrubes, director of Joyful Again, a widowed ministry program offering weekend retreats throughout the Chicago area.

One of the most profound changes is in a woman's social life.

"A widower gets invited to everything," Hrubes notes, "often before he's ready. But most widows are put aside because they are no longer part of a couple."

Many widows report a loss of self-esteem and confidence.

"Initially I felt my identity was gone," says teacher Pat Satterthwaite, 52, of Northbrook. "After Joe died five years ago, I attended several support groups and found that listening to other people—and time—help you to eventually draw on your own strengths. I still go to THEOS when I think I need to, such as around the anniversary of Joe's death."

Widowers, too, must deal with the stresses of an altered life. Men have a higher mortality rate after a spouse's death than women, according to Studner, and statistics indicate a high divorce rate among widowers who remarry. And, Studner says, "women are more likely to circle up and get social support than men."

"My male friends diminished to few if any," recalls Roback, a volunteer facilitator for Joyful Again. "I did crazy things to cope, like going shopping at 11 or 12 o'clock at night just to be with people. I heard of people who cut themselves off [after the death of a spouse], and I didn't want to do that. So I tried to go to a lot of support groups, especially in December. At least for the evening I would feel like a social being again."

Reaching out and joining a group is not always easy, for men or women.

"At first I didn't want to go," says Nancy Braham, 47, a registered nurse in Northbrook, whose husband died seven years ago. "I never liked group things, exposing my personal opinions and fears, but I felt I needed some support. The THEOS group helped, and I continue to go."

see others and to lend a hand."

Bereavement support groups may not be for everyone, but for many widows and widowers they are a safe place to express their grief and all its components, including loneliness.

"One of the most problematic issues in grief is a sense of isolation," says Barbe Creagh, director of psychosocial services at Rainbow Hospice Inc., in Park Ridge, and facilitator of workshops developed with the Widowed Persons Service.

Support groups often counteract the sense of disconnection felt by those who have lost a spouse.

Many widows and widowers describe "coming in the driveway at night" as a continuing source of pain, with its reminder that there is no one inside to hear about the day's events.

Bob Doherty, a retired teacher in Park Ridge and a widower for five years, explains: "Remember in high school how you had a best friend who you would be with all

day, and then go home and talk to on the phone all night? Well, when my wife died, I lost that one intimate friend. There's no more sharing, no bouncing back of ideas."

"The loss of a spouse is the loss of a partner in life," says Sheri Fox, family life educator and leader of support groups for the widowed at the Jewish Family and Community Center in Skokie. "The group becomes a support system they can call on to help get back on track."

"Weekends were the hardest," says Mary Yore, an Oak Lawn widow of eight years. "I used to make a beeline to the mall after mass on Sundays to run away from being alone. But sharing with others in the same shoes helped me to feel I was not alone."

Participants stress that the groups are not a dating service, but most socialize after formal sessions end.

"One tremendous benefit is the network of names you can call afterwards," Roback says. "Our group of about 15 got together for years for birthdays and holidays." And unlike other friends and family members, these are the people likely to call during the lonely times, such as the anniversary of a spouse's death.

Most widows and widowers express dismay at the expectation from family, friends and co-workers that they should pass through their grief in a certain period, often arbitrarily set at six months or a year.

"I was numb for the first six months after Ed died, then I fell apart, and that's when the real grieving started," says Theresa Glaszer, of Chicago, who was widowed five years ago and now volunteers for Widowed Persons Service programs and Joyful Again.

"It's very important for people not to have a timetable," Lopata says. "The idea that healthy people go through certain stages of grief in a certain amount of time becomes very dysfunctional."

In fact, most widows and widowers speak in terms of years rather than months in describing the healing process. "You think you're doing OK, and then you hear an old song, and it's bad all over again," says Obey.

"One of the important things about grief is being able to tell that story over and over again. It takes much longer than six months," says Rita Anton, coordinator of the Archdiocese of Chicago Ministry to the Widowed and editor of a Chicago-area guidebook of non-denominational bereavement groups for the widowed. "Support groups provide a safe environment, a listening ear, and allow the widowed to hear the stories of others."

"The first support group everybody has is the wake, and then everybody leaves you and you have a period of time to fall apart," says Doherty, a Joyful Again volunteer. "Then there comes a time when you need a

support group. I was widowed three years before I joined a group. I can say that if you look for a group of widows and widowers, people who have been there, you will find you're not alone."

They sit in circles in armchairs and sofas, gather around tables with folding chairs. Not everyone speaks up, especially at first. But everyone listens. Stories of husbands and of wives, now gone emerge—often in a choked voice, sometimes with a laugh at a special memory. Fellow widows and widowers understand the tears and the laughter. And through their shared experience, these veterans of loss help one another to heal.

## Resources

Resources for the widowed include:

■ They Help Each Other Spiritually Foundation, 1301 Clark Building, 717 Liberty Ave., Pittsburgh, Pa. 15222; 412-471-7779. Dr. Richard Augspurger, chaplain for the North Shore chapter of THEOS, Institute for Living Pastoral Counseling Center, 690 Oak St., Winnetka, Ill. 60093; 708-446-6955.

■ Anne Studner, senior program specialist, Widowed Persons Service, American Association of Retired Persons, 601 E St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20049; 202-434-2267. Barbe Creagh, facilitator for Chicago-area WPS programs, Rainbow Hospice Inc., Bereavement Center, 1550 N. Northwest Hwy., Suite 220, Park Ridge, Ill. 60066; 708-699-2000.

■ Charlotte Hrubes, director, Joyful Again, Widowed Ministry Program, P.O. Box 1365, La Grange Park, Ill. 60525; 708-354-7211.

■ Sheri Fox, family life educator, Jewish Family and Community Service, Niles District Office, 5050 Church St., Skokie, Ill. 60077; 708-675-0390.

■ Begin Again, Northwest Community Hospital, 800 W. Central Rd., Arlington Heights, Ill. 60005; 708-577-4070.

■ Guide to Groups for the Widowed and Bereaved in the Archdiocese of Chicago (\$5), a non-denominational list updated twice a year, by Rita Anton, coordinator, Ministry to the Widowed, 155 E. Superior St., Chicago, Ill. 60611; 312-751-5389.

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