

FINDING NEW RELEVANCE

After loss of a spouse

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Self care articles for the bereaved

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Losing a spouse means losing our identity

Many widowers rush into new relationships to fill the void that exists in their lives. I get that. It's a quick way to address loneliness, rebuild a social life, and even handle some everyday challenges. With a new relationship, widowers are no longer half of a whole; they discover a new half to make themselves whole.

But let's look at the issue of our loss from another perspective.

Part of your identity of being a husband probably was as a provider, and if your wife had a long illness, you might also have been her caretaker.

Such things give us relevance in life, just as our careers or being a father does. The loss of a wife can cause a loss of relevance.

I'd like to discuss regaining or strengthening your relevance as a part of helping to restore your life.

I regained some relevance when I started a not-for-profit, Michelle's Angels Foundation, Inc.,



whose purpose is to provide love, hope, compassion, and comforting music to those who quietly suffer.

Professor Deborah Carr of Boston University notes that people often find a new sense of purpose or mission in life after a loved one dies. Their inspiration to do so may come from trying to right the wrong that killed their loved one.

Parents of children who die of overdoses dedicate themselves to teaching about the evils of drugs. Widowers whose wives died of breast cancer may walk or run in a breast cancer fundraiser event in her honor and memory. These charitable activities make us feel connected to something larger than ourselves.

After Jeff Gower and his wife Susan learned of her ovarian cancer diagnosis, the two of them dedicated themselves to promoting ovarian cancer awareness as volunteers.

Two months after Susan's passing in 2005, someone asked Jeff if it was too soon for him to be called upon to speak before an audience about ovarian cancer, to which Jeff remarked, "It's never too early to get the word out on ovarian cancer." He has addressed many audiences since.

I met Jeff Gower when he attended one of my speaking engagements. He says, "I came to hear Herb speak because I wanted to educate myself on how I could learn to help other widowers. We are here for a purpose, to lead, to dance, and love again. No matter what our purpose has been in the past, it might be stronger than ever following the loss of a wife. Go out and do some good, make the world better in some way."

After Carl Jahrstorfer lost his wife Patricia, he created a scholarship fund for people who work at the nursing home where he's employed. It is funded by donations and by the sale of a book titled *Walk with Me*, authored by his wife. The book is a compilation of six months of emails that Patricia felt compelled to write while undergoing chemotherapy and surgery for ovarian cancer. It's a moving collection of personal thoughts, insights, and inspiration.

The confidence with which Patricia faced her final days is remarkable. Following Patricia's passing, Carl finished writing Patricia's book and arranged for its publishing.

Ray Henderson lost his wife in 2005. A resident of North Charleston, S.C., Ray was a computer programmer who was more accustomed to writing code than comforting others. But in 2011,



he decided to volunteer for the Red Cross. From a fire in Myrtle Beach to a ravaged community in Oklahoma, or the devastation left by Hurricane Sandy, Ray was there to offer a helping hand. Ray wanted to help, he didn't know how until the Red Cross showed him the way.

MEN OFTEN GAIN A SENSE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT BY BUILDING THINGS.

In Ray's case, he is rebuilding people's lives and the communities in which they live. Ninety-six percent of the Red Cross workers are volunteers, so if you think you would be interested in lending a hand as well as your compassion and skills, why not give them a call?

Whether it's doing work for an organization such as the American Red Cross or the American Cancer Society, volunteering to coach a little league baseball team, or working on a worth-while project for your church, you are sure to find doing so to be therapeutic. And if you are hesitating to volunteer because you don't believe you have the required skills, think again. Give your favorite not-for-profit a call. You are likely to be warmly received. Make this New Year the year you re-discover your relevance.