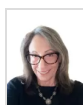


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Sophia Dembling

Widow's Walk

FRIENDS

3 Things Widows Need

These basic categories are crucial for a grieving widow.

Posted November 18, 2022

Reviewed by Tyler Woods



KEY POINTS

- Widows need to be listened to and heard.
- A handyman is gold, but a professional support system has to prove trustworthy.
- Secondary, or invisible, losses add to widows' struggles.
- Widows are not always afforded respect, even from themselves.

What can help widows cope? Sometimes we're not sure ourselves. So I asked Carolyn Moor what she has learned in her many years talking to many widows.

Moor is the founder of the **Modern Widows Club**, an 11-year-old nonprofit with 40 communities and about 50,000 "mem-



Source: Priscilla Du Preez/Unsplash

bers” that she knows of, although there is no formal membership. The organization of widows helping widows offers in-person and virtual support groups, activities, travel, conferences, and more.

Moor was in her 30s when her husband died. She was referred to a grief center and did “the traditional one year of grief support free of charge.

After that, I was kind of just released into society.”

One year is barely enough time for this kind of loss to sink in. The first year is simply the acute stage of grief—a fog of tears, pain, and disbelief. We have barely begun to cope with our changed circumstances.

Moor, an interior designer, emerged from years of darkness with the help of a rabbi she met through the TLC reality series *Shalom in the Home*. She found herself on Oprah with him, and then started mentoring a couple of newly widowed women whom customers asked her to help. And then, “The widows never stopped, and I never stopped saying yes,” she says. In the course of her work, she learned a lot about some of the basic support that can help us (or your widowed friend) manage, such as:

Courageous, compassionate friends

Early on, we just need people unafraid to witness our pain. “Listening ears and uninterrupted time,” says Moor. And the words “Tell me more” are a generous invitation

“Before you call a widow or stop by, don’t expect it to be quick,” says Moor. “She is working through a lot. She may not talk as quickly, she may not think as quickly because of brain fog, she needs undivided attention and time. You need the compassion and empathy to say, ‘I’m here as long as you need me, and I’ll take off whenever you want me to.’ We need friends and family who really understand their emotional-intelligence power in that moment. You’re not there to fix anything.”

I am grateful to the friends who stayed with me in those first raw months, and to the others who checked in daily via text. Only one grew impatient before the first year had passed, so I let her go. More than ever, I require emotional intelligence in the people I allow in my life.

As the widow grows stronger (which takes longer than you think) she may need help getting out of the house. “‘I’ve been coming to you, now I want you to go with me out into the big world,’” is how Moor puts it. “That’s the biggest role: giving the invitation and saying, ‘I will go with you.’ That solo-ness that widows step into is scary.”

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And at some point, widows may need help disposing of their loved one's possessions—the closetful of clothes, the untouched desk. “You have to pick very wisely who that person is going to be,” Moor says. “Not everyone is compassionate or empathetic to someone breaking down because of a sentimental attachment.” (Moor did not enlist anyone to help her two years after her husband's death, but she did take photos of where everything was before she started. “In case I panicked, I wanted to be able to place them back.”)

A team of pros

Moor's grandfather father was a roofer; she's an interior designer. “I understand everything about how houses are built,” she says. So, she was astonished when she met a widow who needed to change her license plate but didn't know the difference between a Phillips and a flathead screwdriver. “This was a new concept to me, that if they had a flood in their bathroom, women didn't know how to turn off the water,” Moor says. (Flashback to sitting on a snowy curb late on a freezing night, sobbing because I didn't know how to turn off my water while my garage flooded. Friends and smartphones saved me.)

YouTube is helpful for DIY, but a good handyman is gold. “People want a reliable person they can trust,” Moor says. “It’s a man coming into your home. Trust with a widow is the very first thing that has to be established.”

Handyman, mechanic, financial advisor—this is a crucial team to put together, and widows are wisely cautious.

“Unfortunately, predation is out of control when it comes to widows,” says Moor. “It truly is the darkest and saddest part of the stories I hear.” (My Facebook grief support group is happy hunting ground for predatory fake widowers. They’re not difficult to identify, and administrators are quick to block them.)

Modern Widows Club vets and recommends service people, and she requests they offer discounts to members, who often are in a reduced financial situation.

Respect

This one must come from without and within. It’s hard not to feel diminished, irrelevant in widowhood. I sometimes feel almost ephemeral without the stability of my marriage. Couple friends aren’t sure what to do with us, and we are unsure ourselves where we fit in. But Moor wants to change the perception of widowhood.

“Widowhood is a stage of life for women,” Moor says. “Single, married, divorced, and widowed. There’s an enormous amount of support for the unborn, young girls, married

women, divorced women. We need to be doing the same thing with the stage of widowhood.”

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Widows rank low in our society’s hierarchy of women’s value, Moor says. “Single and married are nose and nose. Widowed, you drop in society’s rank.” People accused of witchcraft were usually widows. “They were outside the normal social structure that was acceptable. They were ostracized, killed, burned.” The Bible is very specific about caring for widows and orphans, but modern life moves fast, and grief is slow. Grievors can be left behind.

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I understand the squeamishness. Widows are scary—proof that nobody is safe. *It’s great to see you smiling*, people say to me, and while they mean well, it also signals relief at not having to witness my pain. (My response: “I try not to cry in public; it makes people uncomfortable.”) People mostly want widows to get better, and some can grow impatient when, after a couple of years, we still are not (and never will be) our old selves. Widows are sometimes accused of wallowing in their pity party—as if we would choose this prolonged pain.

“We need to listen to widows,” Moor says. “We need to believe widows to be the subject matter experts of their own experience. When women tell you they’re in a brain fog for two years, that it’s difficult to leave the house, we don’t need to give them platitudes and try to fix them, because they’re not broken. They’re grieving. A griever’s mind is different from before they became a griever.”

And, by the way, widows know stuff. If everyone listened to widows, everyone would have life insurance. And a will. Couples would have scary discussions they would rather avoid. “Mortality is an inconvenient truth,” says Moor. But, while 80 percent of men are married when they die, 80 percent of women are not, many through being widowed.

Widows can tell you, too, about secondary, or invisible, losses. “The loss of a parenting partner, income, general sense of security,” lists Moor. “Loss of dreams for the future, best friend, social status. Loss of home, intimacy, shared memory, support system.”

I feel the change in social status keenly these days. For our 35 years together, I was a “band wife.” Tom played in local rock bands, and much of our social life revolved around that. Now I still support friends’ bands but feel like an outsider. Part of my identity has been stripped away, leaving me feeling strangely vulnerable, my edges blurred.

Moor wants to change the conversation around widowhood. “Now I talk of widows as women of fulfilled marriages. Singles and married women should be learning from widows instead of the other way around. Promise made, promise kept, promise honored.”

Til death did us part.

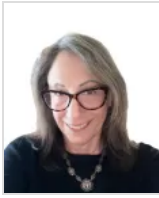
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Widowhood can feel somehow shameful, like it should be hidden. But Moor reminded me that this miserable experience has necessitated strength I didn't know I had. As widows, we possess important wisdom that others fear. We have lived a nightmare and so far survived. We are, behind our tears, mighty and growing mightier as we put ourselves back together. "A wise widowed woman is the most dangerous woman in the world," Moor says, "and she always has been."

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