

# Becoming Resilient in the Face of Grief

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When someone you love leaves this world, it's important to be proactive about your well-being.

Two months earlier, Mita's partner had died suddenly. "I hate this. I hate it so much. When will it get better?" she asked. Her plea carried the familiar chest-crushing tune of [grief](#). As a widow of three years, I knew too well that the truth would seem incongruous if not insulting. So all I said was, "I'm so sorry."

The truth is that grief gets better when you're ready to let it get better.

For those beginning a grief journey, it's complicated to accept that the pain of grief can only alleviate when you accept it. This is why the final leg of the grief journey is called acceptance.

Many suggest that this internal peace comes with the passage of time. That's not quite true, however. Passively ticking days off of a calendar is not a panacea for [loss](#), and those who cling to this axiom may avoid the necessary act of sitting still with grief.

Discovering life after loss is an active process in which you learn the art of [resilience](#). Resilience doesn't mean toughing out hard times; rather, resilience encompasses awareness, wellness, motivation, compassion, forgiveness, and skillful courage.

Research supports the idea that by adopting a conscious practice of resilience, you can accept loss as a natural part of life and choose to continue living with purpose and joy.

The key to becoming resilient is remembering that it's a practice and that grief is often complex—especially when loss comes in succession. As we age, we can experience substantial losses, including the loss of loved ones, employment, health, pets, and more. We cycle through the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. But we don't go through these stages in a linear fashion, that's something I became aware of when my husband died. It's during our work through the stages of grief that we can become stuck in grief and develop maladaptive behaviors.

I was stuck for more than a year after my husband died. I expressed anger by cutting off people who I felt weren't understanding or supportive; I avoided, disassociated, and denied my grief by drinking or shopping excessively; I bargained by dating too soon, creating a facsimile of the relationship I couldn't accept losing.

When a person disassociates, they distance themselves from their loss and grief. This is one of the most common ways people become stuck. Disassociating makes learning resilience particularly difficult because resilience requires conscious vulnerability.

Beyond avoiding maladaptive behaviors such as self-isolation, substance abuse, and so on, there are several things you can do to work through your loss and practice active resilience.

## **Therapy and Social Support**

I started going to therapy and joined online support groups with other widows. Humans are social beings, and loss can be very alienating. As we lose partners, parents, friends, and most tragically, children, we feel both physically alone and emotionally abandoned. As a result, we may withdraw socially; however, in becoming resilient, maintaining a social network is important.

Social support can come from many places, including your religious community and peer support groups. A therapist can offer you a safe place to face your grief. Your friends can do the same. If you've lost your partner and had few meaningful relationships beyond your marriage, or you've lost someone particularly important to you, it's important to understand that you need people, and that may mean making new friends.

## **Building New Ties**

Starting over with a new social group can be daunting. This is where the practice of awareness benefits you. Be aware that while you didn't create your life's circumstances, you're not a helpless victim. You couldn't control what happened, but you can control, to a reasonable degree, what actions you take next. Under the umbrella of wellness, maintaining a healthy social network is vital for resilience. Your network can comprise friends, family, a support group, or a therapist, for example. The experience of meeting new people and making new first impressions can be invigorating if you choose to allow it to be.

When I reached out, I made friends who understood my unique loss situation. Having that understanding made me feel less lonely. Through counseling, I was better able to see my own unhealthy avoidance and move away from those habits. I adopted new habits.

## **Journaling**

Journaling is a resilience practice that helps you practice awareness, get unstuck, label behaviors and emotions, and set your intention for each day, or reflect on your day each night. Initially, I journaled twice daily—once upon waking and once before bed. Journaling let me map out my thoughts and emotions on the page.

In the context of resilience, a daily journaling habit is helpful especially as we move into our twilight years. The practice is reliable and familiar—like a companion—and it can help us express our feelings of vulnerability, fear, and insecurity in a constantly changing and inconsistent world. The stability of journaling and its vitality in a resilience practice can't be overstated.

## Meditation and Mindfulness

A part of my own healing included meditating and practicing yoga and mindfulness. It's normal to experience an identity crisis after a loss, whether it's the loss of a partner, a friend, a job, a home, mobility, or something else. After all, the loss isn't just of the person or thing that you lost; it includes who you were within the context of that relationship or role. It's easy to lose your sense of self during periods of grief.

Because yoga is a holistic practice that involves the mind, body, and spirit connection, it was logical for me to incorporate it into my grief journey. Through yoga and meditative breathing, I became more flexible physically and emotionally. Making space for muscles to stretch and grow conditioned me to make space for grief in my life; it gave me space to accept that loss and grief are ongoing parts of life. I mourned the loss of stability I'd clung to, and accepted that our world is in constant flux.

Note that yoga isn't for everyone; you may find that you experience a similar transformation through ruminative prayer, painting, engaging with nature, or taking a daily walk.

Mindfulness practices, which are very much in alignment with stoic philosophy and biblical teachings, taught me to not label experiences but to observe them. Becoming resilient helps us face our feelings and contemplate them objectively.

For example, many observe that special dates like birthdays and anniversaries can trigger episodes of intense grief. Awareness allows you to prepare for these emotional landmines and give yourself more patience and space, and to ask those in your circle to help however you feel you need.

Ultimately, resilience is built on a continued practice of self-care—it's an ongoing practice that allows you to exercise compassion, forgiveness, and kindness toward yourself and others. Building resilience is an active process that requires you to take steps to support your own well-being and face the loss you're experiencing.

Becoming resilient in the face of grief doesn't happen overnight; as [Heather Stang of the Mindfulness & Grief Institute](#) notes: "Time is not what heals grief either. It is what you do with your time." Actively practicing resilience by adopting whatever practices feel comfortable and natural for you will prove transformative and will allow you to choose love and life when you feel overwhelmed by loss.

Comments from readers of this article:

1. This article is so helpful. My husband died 2 years ago so I can look at it in a bit of hind sight. At first I was so happy for my husband who had died from ALS. Happy for him to be released from that body. I knew instinctively that I needed to be proactive in finding relief from the broken heart that set in a few months later. I joined an online support group for LDS Widows and Widowers a friend told me about. I looked up past talks from the Widow/Widowers Conference. I read a book called Sunset and others. I joined an Emotional Resilience course being offered by my church. I called my therapist when I was stuck. He told me about sitting in my grief but also Name it to Tame it and Feel it to heal it. He said Grief is a feeling experience not a thinking experience. We can't think our way out of it. All these things really helped me. I had heard the 2nd year is harder because the reality sets in. I felt that was true. No one had ever told me that "Grief gets better when you are ready to let it get better." I like that. Acceptance is powerful. I am there. Thank you.
2. So.. I've loved deeply, and lost even deeper. This article tells me that I need to get more active and social; see a therapist that costs money I don't have, join an online support group and visit my church (that I don't have). All fairly decent ideas, I guess... but how do you pull yourself out of the grief and depression enough to even BEGIN all of these ideas?! Furthermore, the "friends and family" support system this writer speaks of... doesn't fully encompass all of society! I have ZERO friends and all of my family is dead!! Zero people. Zero support system. None, nada, zilch! No... I personally sit IN the grief, and feel each and every part of it; leaving none of it undone. Sometimes, even the best laid plans of mice and men... don't work for everyone 🙄
3. Good article. This is an incredibly difficult process. Some recover quickly; some do not. I am one who does not. However, I learned early on to compartmentalize so that I can be happy and productive every day and only address the grief when it is appropriate. I also went to a therapist, which helped greatly both times, so I could find management tools and a way to process the harm others cause. I cannot recommend more the use of a good therapist. Don't use drugs like anti-depressants for a temporary depression. Remember the phrase, "This too shall pass." It always does and it always gets better.
4. There is no "five steps of grief" that people go through in a nice little meat package... First off everybody is different: the Dynamics of the relationship with the deceased and a host of other things including your personality that was formed as you've dealt with things growing up... Everybody's different. For me I grew up used to being alone in a crowd, I may not have liked it all the time and it also gave me advantage over others who don't know how to be OK with being alone. I hate being a widow. I had no support that lasted no support that Truly understood- it was the typical hang around check in for a while then let it drift away. I had to go through my darkness because I forgot to turn to God, I had to deal with more than just my husband's loss I had siblings abandon me as well as a father... And because I didn't turn to God it held me down longer. Somewhere

between year three and four after unpacking and repacking all my baggage and issues I began to be able to feel a little human again. It takes longer when you do it alone but I can tell you that it didn't move anywhere until I surrendered at my lowest to my God my creator, my Lord and Savior. Resilience comes from trust and faith in God. He is the most trustworthy being. No one else is, not even ourselves as He is perfectly good and we are not perfect in any way. Any tragedy is difficult to accept. Grief is all part of the process. When Jesus met with Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, He wept. So, grief is normal. We have to know that all will be vindicated when Jesus comes again. God is just. He is good. He is perfectly righteous. He will make all things right. When Joseph met with his brothers in Egypt they were fearful for all the evil they had done against Joseph. His response was, "while you meant this for evil, God meant it for good." The same is true for all that happens. We may not understand it but in the end, God will use it for good. Trust. He is trustworthy. Accept His peace. Of course, if one has not put their trust in Jesus as Savior, peace will never be possible.

5. Interesting. Honoring one's grief takes resilience and also awareness and also GOD. There is always a spiritual aspect that is a part of grieving, and if you pay attention to it, you can avoid therapy. Andrew Klavan says, "Grief is a desert each person has to cross while keeping one's eye on the star that is God." I rather like that. It has helped me with my journey across the desert of grief. Oh, and the thing that helped me a lot was keeping a diary in the form of a one-sided conversation with my husband to let him know what I was up to. I missed talking to him, so I decided to talk to him. What I most miss is his voice. After a few months of this, I stopped and two years later it was as if a switch was flipped and the world came into focus again for me. I no longer sob, though I still miss him. No one will ever replace him. He is a part of me and the person I became with our nearly 40-year marriage.
  
6. I agree, the saying "grief gets better with time" isn't true. Grief takes time. And grief is great, great love. If you had great love, grief is a validation. I almost like the grief. Both my mom and dad died during covid (not from covid) And I couldn't be with them because of the restrictions. But I write poetry about my love for them and it really helps. Some days are better than others. But one thing I don't do is pretend everything is okay. If I feel the grief coming...I ride with it and it feels kind of good...like my parents are with me.