

Surviving Valentine’s Day after Your Sweetheart Has Passed Away: Five Tips to Help Comfort Grieving Hearts This February 14th

Although Valentine’s Day is meant to celebrate love, it can bring bittersweet memories and pain to anyone left alone in this world of couples. Here’s some heartfelt advice to help comfort those who are grieving a lost loved one this February 14th.

By Joni Aldrich

For kids, Valentine’s Day is a time to exchange funny cards and eat boxes of chocolate. For adults, it’s often much more than just a time to send flowers and buy heart jewelry, chocolates, and cards—it’s a time to rededicate your love to one special person. But when you’re a widow or widower, or have lost your love due to any unfortunate life circumstance, Cupid’s arrow can pierce your heart in a very different way on February 14th. What was once a holiday of “warm fuzzies” can turn into a sorrowful day to overcome. Yet most grief counseling focuses on the holidays in December, not the one in February.

If you find yourself alone on February 14th after years of celebrating with someone you loved very much, the void that you feel can be overwhelming. It’s difficult to see happy couples all around you when all you can think about is the person you have lost.

I speak from experience—I know firsthand the pain of grief and how challenging it can be to persevere through it. In 2006, I lost my husband Gordon after a two-year battle with cancer. In my book about surviving grief—*The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called “Grief”* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1439264935, \$15.95, www.griefbeacon.com)—I tell the inspirational story of my own rebuilding after losing my husband. Each chapter begins with a touching, yet inspirational letter to Gordon that I wrote during my grief “process.” For those dealing with cancer in their lives, my first book, *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* (Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009, ISBN: 978-1-4392550-3-2, \$19.95, www.thecancerlifeline.com), tells the story of my family’s experiences while simultaneously offering valuable step-by-step advice that will give readers the tools they need to have a fighting chance against cancer.

It's true that Valentine's Day holds significance for most couples, but it was particularly special for Gordon and me. After losing my father in February, the whole season had become fraught with painful memories. Then a young man with a lot of heart came into my life, and it just so happened that Valentine's Day was right after our first date. When I got home from work, Gordon had left a bouquet of pink carnations on my front porch. So, it became a yearly ritual for us to use Valentine's Day as the anniversary of our first date together.

Because Valentine's Day held so many precious memories, I still find the holiday difficult to get through, even though it's been three years since my husband died. And I'm not alone. Red hearts and sappy songs on the radio can highlight loss as easily as they can inspire ardor. If you are facing this Valentine's Day by yourself, perhaps for the first time, here are some thoughts that might make the day easier to navigate.

Prepare in advance. Maybe it's true that ignorance is bliss. Even if you wanted to forget about the existence of "V-Day," though, our consumer-driven culture wouldn't let you. Yes, I know you wish you could just hide under a rock until the last conversation heart has disappeared. But ignoring February 14th will only work until you see displays of Valentine's cards in the store, or see the florist busily making the rounds. Survival requires looking deep inside yourself to determine what you might do to make this holiday less painful. There is no secret formula—we're all different—but try to focus on the fact that it's just one day.

Know what to avoid. Yes, it's important to stay integrated into the outside world, and to remember the rituals and traditions you and your sweetheart shared with each other. But consider the possibility that Valentine's Day might not be the best time to do either. Stay away from restaurants. For one thing, have you ever tried to get a table on Valentine's Day? The word "crowded" takes on a whole new meaning. Beyond that, though, the empty place across the table will cast a pall on any pleasant feelings you've managed to work up. Along those lines, avoid any of the "old favorites" that might be painful. Order take-out or cook at home, but don't fix that special dinner you used to make with the person you loved.

Stay busy. Chances are you've heard advice similar to the following: "Get out of the house! He wouldn't want you to stop living your own life." And while such insights might not always be what you want to hear, they are underpinned with truth. If you're dreading the rush of painful emotions and memories that Valentine's Day will bring, try to plan an activity that will take your mind off of things. Schedule some quality time with friends and family. Play some board or card games rather than watching movies, unless there isn't a hint of romance in them. This is definitely one day when romance can be very painful. Instead, focus on a new project that you really enjoy, such as redecorating

your home.

Allow the emotions to come. Remember that grief never fits into a neat timetable, and that it's unhealthy to pretend that everything's okay when it's not. No matter how prepared you think you are or how much of your life you think you may have rebuilt after suffering a devastating loss, grief can still bowl you over with emotion. Valentine's Day is especially tough because not only do you have to deal with your own memories, but your senses are constantly assaulted, too. Try not to focus on the flowers and hand-holding and candy. Remember that it's okay to cry. Let the emotions come—just try to keep them from overwhelming you. Depending on how you feel, you might write a love poem or letter to the one whom you are grieving. The point is that it's okay to remember those whom you loved and lost.

Turn your love to other treasures. Although Valentine's Day is largely marketed to lovers, it isn't limited to them—in fact, far from it. February 14th is a time to focus on anyone and everyone whom you love, such as your children and grandchildren and friends. Love comes in many different kinds of relationships. Celebrate those, even though the loss of the person with whom you were passionate still hurts. In fact, why not buy a box of the old, simple Valentines you distributed as a child and send one to each of your friends? Every day is a good day to tell those whom you love how you feel. And don't forget to love yourself in the process.

While I have rebuilt my life and moved on, my memories of Valentine's Days past with Gordon continue to hold a special place in her heart. As much as possible, try to focus on all of the blessings you still have in your life, and on all of the love that you still enjoy. Life is always a combination of good and bad. We should all appreciate the good, and know that when bad things happen in our lives the only way forward is to take one small step at a time. And remember that one heart still beats and must survive.

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About the Author:

Joni James Aldrich believes that she has been preparing to write *The Saving of Gordon* and *The Losing of Gordon* for most of her life. In her professional career, she has worked in analysis, documentation, communications, and public speaking. However, her real motivation for writing these books was two years of crisis in the cancer school of hard knocks. She feels it is her destiny to relay this story to readers in a way that will help them in their own cancer journeys.

Joni is also the author of *The Cancer Patient W-I-N Book: Our Cancer Fight*.

For more information, visit www.thecancerlifeline.com and www.griefbeacon.com.

About the Books:

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