

Foreword by Reen Mercer



The New Normal

a widow's guide to grief

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THE NEW NORMAL
A Widow's Guide To Grief

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CHAPTER 1



When Grief Hits You Hard

People say you don't know what you've got until it's gone. The truth is, you know what you had; you just never thought you'd lose it."

- Author unknown

All I could hear was my staggered breathing between silent groans. I needed air. I needed to get out of there.

The room started spinning as sounds of basketballs, and excited crowds faded into the distance. Darkness threatened to swallow me whole.

I somehow managed to stumble down the seats and head for the exit. *Don't fall.* I was vaguely aware of voices calling my name. "Olga, are you ok? What's wrong?"

"This can't be happening!" I heard myself say to no-one.

The cool air outside didn't help to relieve the pressure on my lungs. Panic, confusion. Where to go? What to do? *"Oh, God. This nightmare has to be a dream. It can't be real. Not MY Mick."*

All I could do is desperately remind myself, *"Breathe, Olga, Breathe."*

It's shocking how quickly 'life' can knock the wind out of you, isn't it? One minute I was enjoying my daughter's basketball game, and the next I was desperately trying not to faint from grief.

Like most girls, I'd grown up with the dream of meeting that someone special, getting married, having children, watching them grow up, and then becoming grandparents. I knew what I wanted, and up until now, I was living my dream.

Little did I expect that a phone call from Mick's brother would deliver the devastating news that my husband of seventeen years had just died of a heart attack.

"What? MY Mick? No other Mick... MY Mick?"

"Yes," he said. "YOUR Mick."

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I couldn't believe what I 'd heard. Mick and his brother-in-law were only going to the race track at Moruya for the day. A three-hour drive from home.

Their horse was scheduled to race, and then they were supposed to come back. When Mick had left, it wasn't meant to be the last time I said goodbye. Things like this happen to my clients, not me!

My mind recalled our wedding ceremony, seventeen years earlier. *"... to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part."*

Oh, God.

Never in my wildest nightmare did I expect the *"until death do us part"* to come so early. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he was gone. From the confusion of my loss, it was like a knife plunging into my heart, and I felt my world falling apart around me.

Instantly I thought, what am I going to do? How am I going to tell the children?

The other parents who had followed me outside now encircled me; deep concern etched on their faces. "What's wrong?" One by one, I just stared at them in shock and disbelief. My mouth wouldn't form words.

After minutes of silence and tears that ran in constant streams down my face, I managed to whisper, “My husband has just passed away.” Now their faces looked like mine. Shock, disbelief, pain. Tears fell all around. Everyone was just as stunned as me.

I felt a sudden urgency to go home. Now. I needed to be in the place where we built our life together. I needed to feel his presence again.

“Chloe and I need to go home.”

The team manager went to fetch my daughter. She whispered into the coach’s ear and then pulled her from the game. Some of the other mothers collected her bags, and they brought her outside to me.

Chloe was confused. She could tell that something bad had happened, but she had no idea what. I proceeded to tell her that her father had just “gone to heaven to be with Nonna,” her grandmother who had died seven months before. We sat there crying together for a long time.

Then I remembered that my older daughter Alex was home alone. I was desperate to get to her; I didn’t want anyone calling our house and telling her about her dad. She couldn’t hear this terrible news from a

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stranger. I arranged instead for Mick's brother to go over to our house right away and break the news to her.

I said again, "We have to go home."

CHAPTER 2



Heading Home

*“What am I going to do?
What are we going to do?”*

Thankfully, all the parents knew they needed to get me home as I wasn't in any state to drive. The trip home seemed like a lifetime. No clear thoughts were there, just my head spinning with questions upon questions.

“What am I going to do? What are we going to do? Oh, my gosh, what happened? How did it happen? What happened at the time? Where was he? I need to see him; I need to see him myself? How can I see him? I need answers...”

I turned to Chloe occasionally asking if she was okay? Her answers were always only a nod with her head and me saying “We will be okay.”

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I rang our brother in law who was with Mick to get some answers; he said he was still with Mick, the ambulance, and police. He said he would ring me after and tell me everything, as he was also devastated, upset and trying to get his head around what happened.

All I knew was that his body was going to Batemans Bay Hospital and I could not see him. I looked up at the sky, tears running down my face, hoping to see him one more time. Holding Chloe's hand, I thought this does not make any sense.

Then it dawned on me... is this what Mick meant when he said to me last week "under no circumstances can I change my plans on Saturday and take Chloe to basketball."

I can't believe I never questioned Mick on that; it was very unusual for him not to go and watch Chloe play. When I remember thinking Mick made lots of little comments that didn't make sense in the week leading up to his death.

Something inside me was stopping me saying let him enjoy the week. I'll ask next Monday after Easter "what with the strange comments all week."

CHAPTER 3



To Sink Or Swim?

*“When your number’s up, it’s time to go. You don’t
have a choice. The world never stops.
You have to keep going.”*

As we pulled up, a distraught Alex met us and the three of us hugged. We cried desperately; we tried to make sense of what was happening to us.

I went upstairs to our bedroom to be alone and sat for a long time on our bed. As I looked around at the familiar surroundings, the memories of our life flooded into my mind.

Wave after wave, the events of our life together scrambled through my mind. Laughter, tears, highs, lows. Precious times together. Intimate times together. And I let the tears flow freely.

Then I went downstairs, replaying memorable moments with each room, each corner, each step. Vivid

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memories of our life together, perfectly synchronized like a Hallmark commercial. Still trying to make sense of it... it was surreal.

As I stood at the window looking out at the backyard, I remembered Mick always telling me,

“When your number’s up, it’s time to go. You don’t have a choice. The world never stops. You have to keep going.”

Did Mick realize at the time that his words would burn inside me in the wake of his own death? I don’t know. But what I did know was that, at this vulnerable moment, reeling from the emotional tsunami, I had a choice to make.

Was I going to sink or swim?

Was I going to allow circumstances and debilitating grief to ruin my future and stop me from living? Or was I going to allow myself to feel the love and passion of a life well-lived, and walk through the process of grief with my girls, gracefully and successfully?

Was I going to practice my own medicine?

I chose to swim. Mick’s passing was a challenge that life had dealt me, and I was going to survive it to

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the best of my ability. I knew, somehow, I would find the resources within me to keep breathing. I was about to experience grief like many of my clients I helped. That's all I needed to do now.

So my journey began.

CHAPTER 4



Stages Of Grief

As time goes on, we continue to adjust to our life without our loved one. It's a lifetime journey of adjusting, one that never ends.

I mentioned earlier that I am a Clinical Psychologist currently living in Australia. Over the course of my career, I've worked with many clients who were dealing with various forms and stages of grief.

But this was different. Now I was experiencing grief from the other side of the client/therapist relationship. I knew what was happening from a clinical perspective, but it's a whole different ball game when it happens to you.

Before we continue this journey through my story, it's important to lay the groundwork for understanding grief and coping with grief.

There are many different theories that we use in the psychology industry concerning bereavement therapy. The main ones I've found particularly beneficial in my practice, and obviously more relevant after the death of my husband.

1. STAGE THEORY

According to Elizabeth Kübler-Ross in her book called *Death and Dying*¹, there are five stages of grief. These are:

- a. Shock/Denial,
- b. Anger/Resentment/Guilt,
- c. Bargaining,
- d. Depression, And
- e. Acceptance.

Her work with dying patients has faced widespread criticism for suggesting that the grieving person must move through these five stages to successfully attain 'recovery' or 'closure.'

¹ Kübler-Ross, E. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.

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The criticism lies mainly in the seductive promise of an ‘emotional promised land’ by oversimplifying a complicated process.

“They [stage theories] are incapable of capturing the complexity, diversity and personal quality of the grieving experience. Stage models do not address the multiplicity of physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs encountered by the bereaved, their families and private networks.”²

In simpler a term, that means that there is no formula for handling grief, everyone’s experience is different.

Was I shocked? YES, but never in denial. I knew he was not coming back.

Was I angry, resentful and feel guilty? NO, NO and NO. What’s the point, it won’t bring him back, and it won’t help me.

Did I bargain? NO, he was gone, I need to feel the pain. I can’t control death.

² Hall, Christopher. “Beyond Kübler-Ross: Recent Developments in our Understanding of Grief and Bereavement.” *InPsych*, December 2011.

<https://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/2011/december/hall/>

Depression? NO, not clinically but yes feeling low in mood. I understood it was normal for me to feel down.

Acceptance? YES straight away! Life without Mick was my life now; I was a widow.

When I look back, I did not think about the stages at all. Nor did I experience all of them or did I experience them in any particular order.

2. THE DUAL PROCESS MODEL OF GRIEF

This theory, developed in 1999 by Stroebe & Schut³, describes grief as a process of moving between emotion-focused coping and problem-focused coping.

With emotion-focused coping, the individual uses strategies to manage their negative emotional feelings. With problem-focused coping, a person focuses on the many external adjustments required by the loss and addresses the issues in the many ongoing life demands.

While being thrown into the depths of grief, I found that regardless of how I felt and in the depths of despair, I did not react to my emotions but responded to them, while at the same time slowly problem solved.

³ Stroebe, M.S., & Schut, H. (1999). The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: Rationale and Description. *Death Studies*, 23(3), 197-224.

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I learned this through my study of psychology because to manage my grief while at the same time supporting emotionally my children I needed to respond in a way that would help me achieve my goal.

My goal of slowly moving forward step by step and taking each day as it comes. My goal of being able to continue to be the best mother I can to my children given my circumstances.

3. TASK-BASED MODEL

In his *Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*⁴, J.W. Worden says that grieving is to be "considered as an active process that involves engagement with four tasks:

- (1) to accept the reality of the loss;
- (2) to process the pain of grief;
- (3) to adjust to a world without the deceased (including both internal, external and spiritual adjustments);
and
- (4) to find an enduring connection with the deceased in the midst of embarking on a new life."

⁴ Worden, J.W. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*, 4th Edition. New York: Springer, 2008.

As time goes on, we continue to adjust to our life without our loved one. It's a lifetime journey of adjusting, one that never ends.

I've always had a sixth sense, and I knew that in some way Mick would still be connected to us, and so he has that only makes sense to me. When odd things would happen, or a close friend of ours would dream of seeing Mick and giving him messages to pass on to me.

While some messages were clear others were cryptic that would only make sense later.

4. OTHER FACTORS THAT AFFECT GRIEVING

Some have also found that how we grieve is influenced by⁵

- a. Our ability to make sense of the loss,
- b. The type of relationship one had with their spouse,
- c. Finding a benefit such as growth in your character,
and
- d. The way the deceased died.

⁵ Hall, Christopher. "Beyond Kübler-Ross: Recent Developments in our Understanding of Grief and Bereavement." *InPsych*, 2011.

CHAPTER 5



My Experience

Regardless of the theories, I threw them away and started to embrace and experience grief unlike any of my wildest nightmares.

No marriage is perfect, and as I look back over the 17 years, we were like any normal married couple riding a rollercoaster full of ups and downs.

But despite any challenges we had faced together or alone we always were there for each other, supported each other in our goals and dreams and came through any hardships.

I can honestly say Mick was an excellent husband, always wanting to provide for his family and wanting the best for us. He supported my career and helped with the kids and around the house.

Regardless of the theories, I threw them away and started to embrace and experience grief unlike any of my wildest nightmares.

I chose to face that as of 19 April 2014, I was now a widow.

This was my journey of grief, where are you on yours? Has this triggered anything for you? If you're reliving your grief you can always reach out for some help by contacting me at my Facebook group for widows.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/widowsguidetogrief>

PROFESSIONAL NOTE

As a Clinical Psychologist, many of my clients suffering the loss of a loved one, regularly tell me they are not coping. I have found that many widows question the way they are grieving, they wonder what is normal, and many have not read anything on grief.

I often hear other widows explain that they fear reading anything on grief, in case they discover they are not normal. By explaining to my clients, 'the different models helps to normalize their reactions. It also helps them to stop fearing reading about grief.'

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Professionally, I don't work from one model and use aspects from different models, because grief is not a one size fits all model.

If you'd like to read more of Dr Olga Lavalley's book

'The New Normal: A Widow's Guide to Grief'

you can pre-order your own copy here:

www.awidowsguidetogrief.com/OrderBook/

For support please join Dr Olga's – Widow's Guide to Grief Facebook

www.facebook.com/groups/widowsguidetogrief/

..to sink, or swim?..

Dr Olga Lavalle understands the journey of grief from two perspectives... as a Clinical Psychologist and first hand, as a Widow.

Three years ago, she lost her husband suddenly... they thought they had the rest of their lives together. One day he was here... and the next gone.

Since then, she has been raising two teenage girls on her own who are now 18 and 17, being supportive and guiding an adult son (from her husband's first relationship) who is now 28, and working full time as a Clinical Psychologist in her own practice.

While you may be thinking because she's a Psychologist that she would have found it easier to cope because she knew the theory of grief, and helped so many people before.

However, when her husband died, she threw away the theories and became a woman, just like other widows, who learned to embrace and experience grief.

In this book, she shares with readers, what she learnt, how she coped, how she's helped other widow's cope. She does this in the hope that readers find a little peace as they uncover their New Normal too.



*With Love
Dr Olga x*