

## Widowers Support Network



### Widowers Need To Step Out of The Shadows and Into the Light of Day

By Herb Knoll

Author: *The Widower's Journey*

Grieving men are misunderstood. And for a good reason. After all, men don't believe they have permission to grieve in the first place. So when a man experiences a loss, they frequently resort to their primitive behaviors, suggesting to those who will listen, "I'm fine," Oh really? Is that why you sit in front of your TV, endlessly watching programming you have little to no interest in watching, frequently falling asleep in your darkened home, and your half-finished pre-fab frozen dinner resting on your belly. Is that how you define "fine?" I can relate.



For months following the passing of my wife, I would go to work at the headquarters of the bank where I worked at 4 AM (banks don't open until 9 AM). Upon my arrival, I would tune in to my favorite radio station that played one love (sad) song after another. I was usually the last to leave the bank about 7 PM, just in time to get home to another tasteless meal I stockpiled in my freezer, only to do it all again the following day. This went on for four months until one day; a young female staff member entered my office with an important message for me. "The entire floor misses your laughter." WHOA! Say that again. My *wake-up* call had arrived. My behavior following the passing of my wife was precisely like that which I now routinely witness in others as I lead the Widowers Support Network.

Grieving men can become comfortable with their grief, seldom accepting invitations to join others or attending a gathering of one sort or another. They frequently ignore their health by refusing to see a doctor when they experience aches and pains, including what they know to be behaviors symptomatic of one who is depressed and is at risk. Yet, they will continue offering lame phrases in their defense. Some believe they can't expose their vulnerability and are waiting to be rescued. One widowed man once said to me, "It's not manly to talk with you about my grief." How sad.

J. Scott Janssen, MSW, writing for [Social Work Today](#), offers, "I've known plenty of men who fit the stereotype: emotionally controlled, disinclined to talk about matters of the heart, as apt to seek out solitude as connection, focusing on action rather than talk." Janssen adds, "there is evidence that men are more likely than women to remain silent or grieve in isolation, engage in action-oriented forms of grief expression, or lose themselves in distractions such as work or throwing themselves into a new relationship. And you have to know, more than one man has become the victim of a predator woman.

Many widowers relive portions of their life with their wife, including the days they served as caregivers, mentally cataloging all of the ways they failed their deceased wife, convinced she left this world thinking their husband must not have loved her. Guilt sets in, giving the widower even more reasons to cocoon, almost barracking themselves behind the draped covered windows of their home.

Yes, widowed men practice <sup>1</sup>*cocooning*, a term coined in 1981 by futurist and best-selling author Faith Popcorn; defined as "staying inside one's home, insulated from perceived danger, instead of going out." Widowed men will frequently retreat to the confines of their fortresses (aka residences), opting to "tough it

out alone."

Men electing to cocoon place themselves at risk of isolationism from critically needed relationships and significant health risks, increasing the likelihood of self-abuse, including the use of alcohol, legal or ill-legal drugs, and more. As if those risks were not enough, research has shown how 65% of widowed men and women are likely to have a life-threatening illness within one year of their spouse's death. Still, more research suggests how widowers have a suicide rate 3-4 times that of married men. Yet, beneath these risks is the notion, many widowed men hold that their new life is devoid of *relevance*.

Widowers and those concerned about a widower who may be cocooning have several options they can call upon while searching for answers. When widower John Von Der Haar was asked, "What was the best thing that happened to you during your grief journey?" John replied, "When I told my family and friends, 'I'm fine, leave me alone with my thoughts, they ignored my instructions and forced their way into my life, and I am so grateful they did.'" Friends and family take note: don't let a widower cocoon. Force your way into their life if necessary.

Commenting in my book, *The Widower's Journey*, Dr. Deborah Carr of Boston University said,<sup>2</sup> "The importance of social support cannot be overstated; for widowhood as well as many other stressors we face in life, having a confidante – even just one close friend – can do a world of good." Carr continued, "Both close-knit friendships and confidantes can be useful for heart-to-heart talks, but we also benefit from more casual acquaintances that are just fun. These can be clubs, men's groups, sports teams, and the like." As an example, my stepson, Jacques (23 years of age at the time), and I went to a minor league baseball game with my colleagues from the Farm Bureau Bank.

Not only are activities great for social contact, but they can also be a great way to establish a new identity or rediscover an old identity that may have been put on the shelf while the widower was caring for their dying wife. For instance, widower Keith Merriam got back into the Society for Creative Anachronism, an international history group that studies and recreates Medieval European cultures and their histories. Keith also sought out and joined a community theater group. If you enjoy painting, take an art class. Love to read? Join a book group. Athletic? Find a softball or basketball league you can join.

Other recommended options are for you to volunteer to support the efforts to help others stricken with the same ailment as your wife. For example, help organize a walk/run to raise needed research funds or visit hospital rooms of those who have no one to visit them.

Still struggling with the notion of venturing beyond your front door, let your supporters know you would welcome their involvement in discovering what works for you. Remember, allowing someone else into your life, allowing them to be of service, helps them grieve too. For example, I found great comfort in practicing my Catholic Faith. I believe God has directed me to support men who suffer. I also joined the Knights of Columbus, which performs Godly deeds in support of others. You may discover similar comfort by visiting your house of worship.

If you find yourself barricaded behind your four walls still, you may want to see your primary physician as you may suffer from a medical condition that requires attention. Enroll in a grief group like [GriefShare](#). Their program is widely available across America. If you're a bit shy, consider viewing *Walking Through Grief*, an educational nine-disc DVD series offering hope to the bereaved that you can watch in the privacy of your cocoon. See [www.thegrieftoolbox.com](http://www.thegrieftoolbox.com). Whatever you do, cocooning widowers need to get up off their sofas, open their blinds and walk outside.

<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia

<sup>2</sup> *The Widower's Journey*