

## A foot forward



### Getting through grief begins with one step

**If you think you're alone, you're not. If you want help, it's out there. The loneliness, sadness and isolation widows and widowers feel is universal and normal. There are steps one can take to move forward through the grief.**

Judith Fox, 71, knows the topic of widowhood — inside and out. She lost her first husband to lung cancer when he was 53. She's also the author and photographer of the book "One Foot Forward — Stories and Faces of Widows and Widowers." (powerHouse Books) "I was widowed at 50 and knew no one else who was widowed," she says. "Suddenly I found myself smack in the middle of a world I was totally unprepared for and knew nothing about. I cried a lot in the year following my husband's death.

Even though I had a career, supportive family, and caring friends, I think my grief and mourning would have been a little easier — it's never easy — if I knew how other widows and widowers survived and what their experiences were like."

Fox was motivated to write the book in order to share the knowledge and understanding she didn't have when her husband died. "I wrote the book that would have helped me then and that I hope will help other people now," she says.

#### Personal journey

While grief is a personal journey, and the response to it unique to each individual, there are somewhat predictable stages for the journey through grief, says Michele A. Reiss, a psychotherapist with a private practice in Pittsburgh, Pa., who wrote an essay for Fox's book.

"Initially there is a phase of shock or disbelief," she says. "Interestingly, this first reaction occurs regardless of whether the loss has been anticipated (i.e. after a prolonged illness) or totally unexpected (an accident, suicide, homicide etc.). The language of the first phase is, 'I can't believe it... It doesn't seem real...' The middle phase, she says, is acute mourning and many people are not prepared for its intensity.

"Acute mourning occurs as the painful reality of the irreversible loss starts to set in. There are tears, whether shed publically or not," says Reiss. "Usually fatigue, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating, heightened emotionality, and even some physical discomfort such as chest tightness or gastrointestinal upset are all common experiences for the newly and acutely bereaved."

Over time, the frequency and intensity of this middle phase of acute grief starts to lessen.

"Thus begins the third stage of coping with loss," Reiss says. "Slowly there will be easier hours, easier days and easier weeks. Life will have a structure and routine to it again. Socializing will not only be easier; it will be enjoyable. There will be less fatigue and more energy, and day to day tasks will no longer seem overwhelming."

#### The faces

Fox photographed and talked with women and men whose spouses died gradually or suddenly; people who are young, middle-aged, and elderly; individuals who had been in complex marriages and people who had marriages that were uncomplicated, she says. The beautifully photographed faces are as expressive as the words.

"The 20 individuals profiled in "One Foot Forward" are just like us: our neighbors, our family members, and our friends. They're inspiring and remarkable — everyday people with extraordinary stories."

Fox says she believes art can help us heal because it connects us as human beings and teaches us — and reaches us — in a way that leaves us feeling less alone. We see things differently through art and that fresh point of view can help encourage conversations that can be significant and even life altering, she says.

"I'm a big believer, too, in the power of stories to comfort us," she adds. "As human beings we learn from the stories of others — but only if others are willing to tell them and only if we're willing to hear them. Happily, the people I interviewed for "One Foot Forward" were willing to tell their stories and they were brave and generous enough to do so honestly."

#### The group

One way to tell your story and hear what others have to say is to join a support group. "Grief is a very individualized journey, so the decision to join or not join a support group is probably best made by the person doing the grieving," Reiss says.

"However, the experience of knowing someone who has experienced and is surviving a similar loss, seems to be almost universally helpful."

Joining a support group — and in one case, starting a support group — has been universally helpful to three area people.

Beverly Koukul, a widow in her 70s, was still crying at the mere mention of her husband Frank several years after he died. She had been attending meetings of the Orland Park chapter of the support group Widows and Widowers and found it helpful, but felt she needed to take a bigger step to move forward in her recovery.

Koukul resides in Willowbrook and she decided one way to help herself and others was to start a West Suburban chapter of Widows and Widowers. Last October she did just that. With the help of her daughter she publicized the group on [www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com). It took off and now meets the second Thursday of every month at local restaurants.

"It has grown dramatically and quickly," Koukul says. "We have about 60 members who come from all over.

And they're all ages, from 45 to 80. Not everyone comes to every meeting, but we have a steady attendance of about 15 at our meetings."

The group does a lot of laughing, says Koukul, and they feel comfortable to share memories or talk about their lost loved ones.

"There is a need for people to look for companionship and conversation in situations of like," she adds. "We're all in the same boat."

#### Shipmates

That situation of like is what propelled Carolyn Siska, a 60-plus widow of three years, to attend Koukul's group. Siska, a Westchester resident, has a large and supportive family and a busy career as a managing broker for Coldwell Banker Stratford Place, but she found she wasn't taking the time to get out and make new friends.

"I thought it was a good idea to get out and do some socializing," Siska says. "It's hard to make new friends after your children are grown.

A group like this exposes you to different ideas. The attitude of this group is upbeat and that's a nice thing."

Vince Falcone, 42, of Elmwood Park, lost his wife to a second stroke in October of 2012.

He knew he needed specific help in the grieving process — "talking to people who could relate" — so he turned to the Internet to find it.

"I went online and Widows and Widowers came up," he says. "Where they meet was convenient so I thought, 'let me give it a try.'" Falcone went to one of the first meet-ups, began with, "Hello, my name is Vince," and it just flowed from there.

"What's nice is that you are talking with people who have dealt with the same thing," he says. "These are real people who know this devastation and catastrophe and we're talking one on one. Nothing is off limits — anecdotes about our loved one, talk of the good times. Everyone knows exactly where I'm coming from."

Siska acknowledges that it's hard to take the first step to go to such a group but she urges people to try.

As for Koukul, an attempt to move forward in her own grieving process has evolved into helping others do the same thing.

"I thought this was going to be difficult and it wasn't at all," she says. "You learn how to meet people, greet people and care about them.

That's what you do."

