

The For Survivors of Fallen Firefighters Journey

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*The healthy, the strong individual, is the one who asks for help when he needs it.
Whether he has an abscess on his knee or in his soul. ~ Rona Barrett*

Most of us would agree that people need support in difficult times, but asking for help for ourselves can be awfully difficult. The death of a loved one is among the most stressful life events we can experience. So why is it so hard to seek help?

People have different beliefs that can make them resistant to getting the support they need and deserve. *I have to be strong for my family. My faith will get me through this. I don't want to burden anyone with my problems. If I ask for help, that means I have failed. There are other people who need the help more than I do.* Sometimes, grieving people can get through the basics of day-to-day life, but simply don't have the extra energy it takes to seek help.

Grief has long-term effects on physical, emotional, and mental health. Just as with physical illness, it is

a time to educate yourself, access the best resources, surround yourself with a support team, and make your own wellbeing a priority. This takes different forms for different people. It may mean asking friends to help with childcare and meals, or scaling back on your activities for a time. It may mean working with a professional grief counselor, or focusing on your physical health. It definitely means taking an active role in your own healing, and finding your way in a world that has changed.

When someone you love dies, some degree of suffering is unavoidable. But you don't have to suffer unnecessarily. And you don't have to do it alone.

In this issue, survivors talk about reaching out for help after the death of their loved one.

By MaryRose McNamee

wife of Firefighter Steven J. McNamee (1993-IL)

I was thinking back to my initial days after losing Steve. I remember being surrounded by so many wonderful people, even some I didn't know. They reached out to me and my children and offered to help in any way they could. Just the overwhelming number of individuals helped me to feel that our loss was recognized and validated.

Over time, you do come to learn who will be there for you in the long run. I was lucky to have a handful of individuals who I knew I could call on at any time to be there for me. Whether I needed a favor, a hug, to cry, or to scream, I always knew someone was out there willing to help. That knowledge in and of itself was sometimes all I needed to get me through the dark days.

I also received copies of pictures that friends and family

had of Steve that showed him in so many of his everyday moments. It reminded me that he did live a very full, if abbreviated, life. This went a long way in reminding me that he will live on



MaryRose & her son, Steven McNamee

not only in my and my children's memories, but in the memories of so many others.

I was given many books to read to help me cope with my loss. I think I found the most comfort and help in reading Companion Through the Darkness by Stephanie Ericsson. I felt like the author, a widow herself, was speaking of

continued inside

my experiences and validating my thoughts and feelings. I have shared this book with other individuals who have

lost a spouse over the years, and they have also had a positive reaction to it.

By Marlene Moore

Mother of Jared Michael Moore (2004-KS)

We started grief counseling just a couple of weeks after our son was killed. He gave us the usual advice: try to stay active, watch funny movies, don't make any major decisions. For the most part, he would say, "Jared had a good life with a family that loved him." Somehow, this didn't heal us.

We went to our MD for physical side effects of grief. My husband's blood pressure shot up, I blacked out when stressed, and we both had chest pains and insomnia. Our physician prescribed an antidepressant, which helped with the physical symptoms, and referred us to another counselor.



Jared & Marlene Moore

Many, many times I have heard derogatory remarks about using prescription meds to help with grief. My father-in-law quipped, "How could a stranger help solve your problems?" I think this is sad, and it prevents some from getting help when they need it the most. Yes, there are side effects, and we both had to try several before getting the one that helped the most. They do help with concentration, as well as insomnia and most of the other physical problems we were experiencing. Did they take away our pain? No, but they certainly helped to manage it. I still get irritated by those who shame people who had to use medication and will brag for not needing a "quick fix" or a "band-aid." Do we shame someone for taking aspirin for a headache by telling them it would be better to tough it out? Of course not.

The second counselor was much more helpful. It was a tremendous help to get advice from someone who didn't know Jared and who was objective in the realities of what the future would hold. I remember telling her I was going to make the man who killed Jared apologize for what he had done, and he was going to take responsibility for his actions. She told me to work on a Plan B, because most likely it would never happen. She was right. We

continued with the counseling until my husband lost his job and insurance, but we were much stronger by that time and able to manage better.

About a year after Jared's death, we began attending The Compassionate Friends support group. This was another huge help. We could share Jared and our grief with others who knew exactly what we were going through. We still attend these meetings and are in the process of becoming chapter leaders in hopes of helping others.

I read books on grief and found those written by other parents the most helpful. We attended a Gary Smalley conference, which helped us relearn how to forgive and let go of some of our pain. I realized I had to let go of the resentment I felt towards those who I thought should have supported us and didn't. I now pray for God to take the pain and anger out of my heart every day, and it truly helps.

I did have friends to talk to, and this was a huge comfort. I would just call and invite them to lunch when I had to talk, and they listened. I quickly learned I needed to make the call and not wait for others to call me. I wish I could say our church was there for us, but it wasn't. Some of the most hurtful words spoken to us came from fellow church members. We had to learn to help ourselves crawl out of the darkest hole imaginable any way we could. If there was something that was supposed to help, we were willing to try. It took all of it to help our hearts begin to heal.

It was hard in the beginning to ask others for help. That is something that was always outside my comfort zone. But at times our grief was so overwhelming, I had to get beyond that point, and learned not only to ask for help when I needed it, but who to ask.

At the first NFFF Survivors Conference, we met Marie and John Collins. They were a little further down the road on their grief journey. At several low points when I felt we were stuck and I needed advice, I wrote to Marie. She was always quick to respond, and her advice was invaluable. Marie was an answer to my prayers.

How I Coped with Losing My Hero, My Dad

By Baylee Cox

Daughter of Anthony P. Cox (2007-KS)

Every month my mom and I receive *The Journey*. My mom never forces me to read it, but has always let me deal with my dad's death in my own way. This month, she insisted I read the back, "We Want to Hear From You" section. So I sat down to read, "What do I do to help my child with losing their parent?"

As I read it, I heard many things my mom has said since I lost my dad. Is she making the right decisions about raising me? I am very lucky as I am the MOST important thing to my mom. She even changed jobs when my dad died so that she would be home to put me on the bus in the morning, and be there when I got home every day after school. She insisted that we go to counseling. She also insisted that I journal some of the things I was feeling and that I write something to my dad at his funeral. I am glad she did, because as she told me, "You won't ever get that opportunity to write something to him again."

The first counselor we went to was provided by my dad's fire department. They gave us six counseling sessions to let us talk about what had happened. I didn't care for the first gal, so my mom contacted the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation and was told that our local hospice organization had classes especially for kids. They were all at a cost we could afford.

One was called Camp Kari. It was a one day event for kids and parents. While the kids did art therapy, the parents talked about their current challenges with losing a loved one, and how their child was dealing with the loss. Camp Kari was awesome!! I am very artistic, and many of the activities we did used art activities to get us to share what we were feeling. We made drawings, shadow boxes, and even stuffed our own teddy bears. I got to hear what other kids were feeling, and it made me realize I had some of the same feelings.

I started going to the art therapist that ran the kids section of Camp Kari. My mom thought it was important for me to be able to talk to someone about how I felt. I

learned that I have rights to grieve, that it is ok to be sad. I learned that as I mature, my dad's death will affect me differently.

I know that everyone deals with things differently, but I would have to say talking with someone was the best thing my mom ever suggested I do. I have someone now besides my mom that I can tell anything to. I have someone I can confide in, cry with, and laugh about all the great times I had with my dad.

I am going to help with Camp Kari soon. Someday I would like to go to the National Fallen Firefighters Memorial Service and help with other kids. I am so lucky to have a mom that cares so much! Thanks, Mom, for caring so much! Thanks, National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, for telling my mom where to turn for help!

So, from a teenager's view, I would say find someone that your child can talk to, someone that they feel they can confide in, someone they know they can tell anything to. You may not find that person on the first try. Also encourage them to write their feelings, journaling about what is happening in their life. Maybe write a poem about how they feel. Tell them to draw about what they are feeling. Help them make things to remember their firefighter.

Even though my parents were divorced, my mom has helped me put up pictures in my room of my dad. I have his medal of valor, a poster of the memorials, his pocket badge with his badge number, and a "pennies from heaven" jar. You see, every time it seems like I need to talk to my dad, I seem to find a penny. I figure it's my way of talking with my dad and knowing that, no matter what, he is always looking out for me.



Baylee Cox

Online Resources

There are many resources available online to help with grief and bereavement. Here are a few:

www.compassionatefriends.org - An international support group for bereaved parents and siblings, this site includes grief literature, links to local chapters across the U.S., and information on national, regional, and local events.

www.aarp.org/family/lifeafterloss - Resources for dealing with grief, handling paperwork and recordkeeping related to a death, financial and legal concerns, and more.

www.youngwidow.org - Information specific to those who

have lost a spouse at age 50 or under. Includes a bulletin board, online support, and information about dating and children.

www.dougy.org - The Dougy Center maintains a list of children's grief support programs across the country. Visit the site to search for a program in your area.

A more extensive list of resources is available in "Family Resources" at www.firehero.org.

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program (PSOB)

PSOB Frequently Asked Question...

I heard that the PSOB Office sent out PSOB Information Kits — and a Guide to the Hometown Heroes Survivors' Benefits Act. How can I get copies of these? Distributed to more than 60,000 public safety agencies nationwide, the PSOB Office is currently out of hard copies of these vital PSOB resources, but is on schedule to update, reprint, and mail the Kits and Guide in 2010. For an electronic copy of these resources, please visit the PSOB homepage at www.psob.gov. All of the information contained in the Kit, as well as the Hometown Heroes Guide and other materials related to the PSOB Program, are available online.

Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Program provides death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the program.



BJA
Bureau of Justice Assistance
U.S. Department of Justice

Public Safety Officers' Benefits Program
Toll-free: 1-888-744-6513

We want to hear from you...

Some people feel that their loved one knew that death was imminent. Other people describe "signs" after the death that make them feel their loved one is close by or watching over them. These experiences may come in the form of premonitions, dreams, or just a sense of presence. They are generally very comforting to survivors, but people often keep these experiences to themselves because they are afraid of what other people will think.



If you'd like to share your thoughts on this topic or other aspects of your journey, please send a Word document or e-mail to Jenny Woodall at jwoodall@firehero.org. If you don't do computers, send a typed or neatly handwritten copy to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation
The Journey
PO Drawer 498
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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