

GRIEVING FROM AFAR

When geography has you, or your friends, healing from a distance.

by Heidi Smith Luedtke, Air Force spouse

Air Force spouse Stefanie Cutter was home with three small kids when she learned that her father had been hospitalized. After two heart attacks and subsequent bypass surgery, his organs shut down one-by-one. "I was worried and helpless," Cutter said. "It was the worst feeling in the world."

Geography didn't help. Cutter's family had recently PCS'd to Colorado Springs, Colo. Her father was hospitalized in Florida. And her husband was in training in San Antonio, Texas. When her sister asked her to serve as their father's medical proxy, Cutter made a whirlwind trip. "I went straight to the hospital to assess my father's condition," she said. "The next morning, I advised the nursing staff to take him off of life support, made funeral arrangements, and notified friends and family." Then she boarded a plane and went home.

LOST AND ALONE

Grief can come from many different places: Death, serious illness or injury, financial crisis, or loss of a job or relationship can leave you dazed and confused. It may feel like a horrible, gut-wrenching dream.

Grief is isolating, but it may be especially so for military spouses stationed far from family and close friends. "Others may distance themselves because they feel uncomfortable – they don't know what to say

or do," said Robin Goodman, Ph.D, licensed clinical psychologist. The bereaved person may withdraw, too. They may be too exhausted by everyday tasks to interact. Invisible losses – like miscarriage and financial failure – may be loneliest of all, Goodman said. In these situations, the bereaved person may fear they'll be stigmatized if others know what happened.

Repeated miscarriages hit Air Force spouse Jusika Martinez-Guzman particularly hard. Shortly after the birth of her first child, Martinez-Guzman found out she was expecting again. The pregnancy was ectopic, and she lost the baby and one of her fallopian tubes. "I was heartbroken," Martinez-Guzman said. "I didn't understand why I lost a child. The residual pain from the tube removal procedure was a constant reminder of my loss." Precisely a year later, she miscarried again. "Being stationed overseas at Aviano, Italy, away from family was – and is – very hard," said Martinez-Guzman.

NO TIME LIMITS

Grief evolves, and there is no set timetable for it, explained Goodman. After a loss, your feelings may lag behind your understanding of the facts.

Grief may not hit until you're back to "normal" life, said Tina Tessina, Ph.D, psychotherapist and author of "Money, Sex and Kids: Stop Fighting about the Three Things That Can Ruin Your Marriage." Each person's experience is unique.

"A nurse at the hospital counseled me about grief," Martinez-Guzman said. "But I didn't realize what I was going through. I tried to hide the hurt and sadness with jokes, but six weeks after I lost Max, the emotions got the best of me."

Even long after you think you've moved on, rebounds are common.

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Christina Bushby, a mortuary affairs officer and Air Force spouse, understands this. Her son, Casey, died nine days after delivery. She held him in

her arms as they removed him from life-support machines. As he took his last, shallow breaths, he opened his eyes and looked into hers.

"Grief really didn't hit me hard until we moved to RAF Mildenhall in the United Kingdom, far from where I buried my son in southwestern Ohio," Bushby said. Two years after his death, Bushby received her son's baby pictures in the mail from the hospital.

Where to Turn

National Suicide Prevention Hotline
1-800-273-TALK

SOFAR
Providing psychological services to Reservists and their families.
sofarusa.org

Give an Hour
Free private counseling to military members and families affected by service in Iraq or Afghanistan.
giveanhour.org/skins/gah/home.aspx

Military OneSource
Face-to-face, telephone, and online counseling for service members, Guard and Reservists and family members.
militaryonesource.com/MOS/About/CounselingServices.aspx

"Seeing them opened up a floodgate of emotions," Bushby said. "I had tried so hard to bury these feelings inside me. I was far away from the baby that was a part of me for nine months and nine days." The images were agonizing.

When grief hits you, Tessina said, face it. Eventually, you have a certain number of tears you have to cry. The more you let that happen, the better.

HOW TO COPE

After a loss, you may feel as if the ground has been pulled out from under you. Here are five ways to regain your footing:

1 Seek Support

Reach out to neighbors, friends, chaplains and counselors. "The people at the Family Support Center offered a great big shoulder to cry on," Bushby said. Tell people what you need; most really want to help.

2 Distract yourself (a little)

"It sounds cliché," Cutter said, "but staying busy and taking things one day at a time really helped." Go places and do things. Take on a project. But don't avoid your grief completely, Tessina cautioned. That will cause more problems down the road.


3 Say Yes

Grief is a very private, raw, personal kind of affair, but it helps to let others in. Accept assistance with everyday chores and activities. You need time to focus on feelings and find a new normal.

4 Be Grateful

The best way to move from "why?" to acceptance is to focus on gratitude, Tessina said. Bushby expressed this poignantly. "I miss Casey," she said. "I will always wonder how he would have grown, what kind of kid he'd become. Losing a son was horrible. But I'd rather have nine days of something wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special."

5 Speak Up

Talk about your loss. "Don't bury your true feelings along with your loved one," Bushby said. Join a support group. "Until someone walks a mile in your shoes, they don't have room to criticize." Not ready for face-to-face? Reading other women's stories on the Internet has been really helpful to Martinez-Guzman, who also blogged about her experiences. 

HAVE A FRIEND WHO IS STRUGGLING?

Some phrases may sound sympathetic, but can do more harm than good. Psychologist Robin Goodman suggests avoiding these:

"I know how you feel"

(even if you did go through something similar, find out how they feel)

"It's for the best"

(this is not comforting just because you might think it is true – your grieving friend wants to get back what they lost)

"Your loved one is out of pain, no longer suffering, and is in a better place"

(this may feel like you are minimizing the bereaved person's loss)

For more details on helping friends cope with grief, visit milsouse.com/grieving

Is it Grief or Depression?

Ninety percent of people are able to get back to routine tasks in a short period of time, says Katherine Nordal, Ph.D, clinical psychologist and executive director for professional practice at the American Psychological Association. They go back to work, fulfill their roles as parents and re-engage with social networks. People are surprisingly resilient.

Less commonly, grief can lead to depression. When the person feels constant prolonged yearning for what they've lost and cannot get their mind off their loss, they may need professional help, Nordal says. Warning signs also include loss of interest in activities, relationships, and eating, weight loss, sleep disturbance and suicidal thoughts. If you or someone you know seems to be stuck in intense grief, get counseling.

"Grief is like going through winter," said Tessina. It can be cold and isolating. "But spring eventually comes, and things begin to bloom and live again." Be patient.

