

Personal Story

Angie, partner of Mark



BUILDING A JUST SOCIETY

other people's stories

Mark died just before Christmas 2002. He and I had only 18 months together before he died but I had absolutely no doubt that we were life partners. We shared the same interests, we had the same life goals, we clicked into each other's lives and families, and absolutely everything we did together was so much fun. I loved him with every fibre of my being and I know he felt exactly the same about me.

Then he had a recurring episode of an illness that had plagued him for pretty much all his adult life and he had to go to hospital for two weeks. They treated him and he got better. The night before he came home I decorated every room in the house with these silly little signs that said "Welcome Home". I did each one differently and I put them everywhere, which was a bit embarrassing for him when his Dad brought him home the next day.

Mark had to go to hospital because he suffered from severe depression and when I came home from work the day after he came home, I found him dead by suicide.

And I tore into a thousand tiny shreds and my world shifted forever.

I'd been fortunate; I'd never had a serious loss before and I thought grief was basically lots of crying which peaked at the funeral and then you "got over it" and "moved on". I wasn't prepared for the utter emotional, physical, and mental chaos.

I wasn't prepared for all the other emotions that came with it – the guilt, the anger, the fear. I didn't realise I'd have anger so intense I'd end up raging around the house beating up my furniture. I didn't realise I'd have to go through all this guilt where I'd endlessly go over things I'd said and didn't say, did and didn't do, should have done and shouldn't have done until I eventually

realised he didn't die because of something I did or didn't do. I didn't know about the fear and panic attacks so bad I'd get lost in the supermarket or in the park near home where I tried to walk each day just to keep myself healthy.

I didn't realise I'd lose so much weight my own health was threatened because I simply couldn't eat and went for months only able to eat tiny meals a day.

I wasn't prepared for the disrupted sleep and the dreams that woke me up several times every night for months.

I wasn't prepared when six months after Mark's death I fought my own battle with the suicide demons. I got through but I also know that I came terrifying close to joining him at that time.

I needed help and I grabbed it wherever I could find it. It wasn't easy. I'm naturally pretty independent and it wasn't easy to ask for help but I was in crisis and I knew I needed support from others.

I got straight into grief counselling within a week of Mark's death and I stayed in it for about 18 months. I went back into counselling a couple of years ago.

I needed information about what was happening to me so I read every book – about grief and bereavement, about depression and suicide, about loss of a partner. It helped me enormously.

The books tell you to stay away from drugs but even though I'd quit smoking, I crawled straight down a packet of cigarettes and stayed there for a couple of years. And I don't care what they say – it helped!

I consulted with my doctor and she put me onto medication to help me sleep. It's not for everyone, but I absolutely know that it

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A program of
Jesuit Social Services

helped me. They're addictive but I weaned myself off them.

I hunted down fellow survivors – friends and acquaintances who had lost their partners. I needed to be around people who really got it, and most people in my circle didn't get it – though I am so very grateful to those who tried anyway.

I attended a suicide bereavement support group. I cannot tell you how much good it did me to turn up on the first day to find all these beautiful, normal people who were also survivors. It sounds silly to say it but it wasn't till then that it occurred to me that if they were normal and nice and it had happened to them then perhaps I was also normal and nice!

I looked after myself physically – with exercise nutrition and massage.

Everyone copes with their grief journey differently and I know some need to get busy, but I needed to slow the world down and I gave myself permission to do that. I didn't go back to work for four months after Mark's death, then when I did I worked only a three day week, then four days. I still work only a 9-day fortnight but that's not because I'm not up to it anymore but because my values have shifted and I like to spend my time differently nowadays.

I needed massive amounts of solitude and I took them. I shut the front door, took the phone off the hook and gave myself permission to immerse myself in my grief. I loved him with intensity and I grieved for him the same way.

I journalled. I've filled seventeen A4 spiral bound books of 100 pages each. There was so much to get down – and out of me.

So those were some of the things that helped me. There were two things that didn't help – the first was mine and others expectations of me. I have this silly book that I had at the time that records my expectations of myself – I was going to quit smoking within 3 months, get back to a normal body weight by June, etc. Ridiculous expectations really – but I didn't know any better.

The second was people who didn't 'get it'. Though for every friend that let me down, it's fair to say there was another one who came out of the woodwork and exceeded my expectations. One person wanted to 'fix' everything and you know I couldn't be 'fixed'. I gave myself permission to shut some people out of my life while I was in crisis. I'm happy to say those people

are now back in my life and the relationships are back on track.

So how am I now?

When I started my journey I thought my task was to make the world a safe place again. I realised at some stage that the world will never be a safe place again and that my task in healing is in fact *to live fully in the world even knowing it will never be safe.*

I know things about myself I never would have known. Before this, I might have wondered whether I had courage or strength. After this, I will never, ever doubt that I have courage, and strength, and resilience. It helps put things in perspective too. Stuff that used to bother me at work doesn't bother me anymore. I've survived this, so it barely registers.

There's been quite a shift in values. I really had to question my shallow and meaningless existence before Mark's death and I'm in touch with different, deeper values now. That shift in values has caused a massive career crisis that I'm still wrestling with. I struggle with how I can continue to work in the corporate sector when I feel the need to fulfil a life purpose – to contribute more.

My friends tell me I have more compassion and empathy – which can't be a bad thing.

My friendship group has changed. But I'm not sorry. For every friend I lost, I gained another, and when I look at the people around me now, I have no regrets for how the circle has changed.

And finally I'm in a new relationship. I treat this relationship differently because of what I've been through. The first thing that's different is that every time we have a little hiccup, I have all this doom and catastrophe. But I'm working through that.

The main change is that I never waste a precious moment in this relationship – I never fail to appreciate what I have right when I'm having it and I never fail to let him know exactly how I feel about him. It's not that I live in fear that he'll die, but that I know there are no guarantees and I don't want to miss showing him how I feel.

For Support Services:

www.supportaftersuicide.org.au

<http://community.supportaftersuicide.org.au>