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For Many Widows, the Hardest Part Is Mealtime

New attention is being paid to the role of food and cooking in grieving for a lost partner.



From left, Leah Gray, Diane Kantak and Michele Zawadzki laugh together at Culinary Grief Therapy in the Chicago suburbs. The three widows, like many of the group's attendees, have become friends outside of the meetings. Credit...Taylor Glascock for The New York Times

By [Amelia Nierenberg](#)

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GLEN ELLYN, Ill. — When her husband, Bill, died six years ago this month, Michele Zawadzki squared her shoulders to the grief.

They had been together for 47 years — since high school, when they were prom dates — so she knew that life without him would be trying. Not just holidays, but even mundane matters like taking care of the car. When a pipe broke in her toilet, spraying water all over, Ms. Zawadzki, 68, didn't know what valve to turn off or whom to call. Mail for him kept coming.

What she didn't expect, though, was how difficult it would be to turn on her stove. Or how hard it would be to go to a restaurant with their friends and be the only one driving home by herself at the end of the night. Or how it would feel to walk supermarket aisles, past the foods he loved.

In the checkout line, she'd watch the clerk scan produce she knew would rot, and bread she knew would go stale; she was still shopping for two, but eating for one. When her freezer filled with excess food, she started throwing out meals — throwing out his portion, really, because he wasn't there to eat it.

“There are triggers everywhere with food,” Ms. Zawadzki said. “You get home, you're still by yourself, and you're used to cooking a certain way. It's debilitating.”

The connection between food and mourning runs deep: In almost every culture or tradition, a community brings dishes to the survivors in the weeks or months after a death. But for a spouse, accustomed to sharing every meal with a partner, the grieving can go on long afterward, renewed constantly by the rhythms of shopping, cooking and eating.

“It's almost like the sixth stage of grief is cooking alone,” said [Jill Cohen](#), a grief counselor in New York, referring to the [now-disputed theory](#) of the Five Stages of Grief, developed by the psychiatrist [Elisabeth Kübler-Ross](#).

Bereavement counselors said that only in the last decade have academics and nonprofit groups begun directly addressing the relationship between grieving and food. At meals hosted by [The Dinner Party](#), an organization that has expanded in more than 100 cities worldwide since its founding in 2014, people in their 20s or 30s who have lost someone meet regularly to share. Ms. Cohen said many of her patients bring up eating issues in therapy.



From left, Michele Sharp, Pat Smith and Ms. Gray prepare a straightforward meal that would be easy to make at home. After meeting in the group, they went to Ireland together with two other participants to scatter the ashes of Ms. Sharp's husband. Credit...Taylor Glascock for The New York Times

In the Chicago suburbs, a free support group called [Culinary Grief Therapy](#) directly addresses the link between food and widowhood. (Bereavement counselors now use “widow” as a gender-neutral term, like actor or waiter.)

The three-year-old group grew out of a [2016 study](#) on the difficulties of eating and cooking as a widow. Grocery shopping and preparing meals alone could be painful and overwhelming, the study found, and could often lead widows to skip meals or eat in expensive or unhealthy ways.



At Culinary Grief Therapy, attendees enjoy a meal after the cooking demonstration. They take home booklets with recipes after the class. Credit...Taylor Glascock for The New York Times

“Cooking and mealtimes are some of the most overlooked aspects of grief,” said Heather Nickrand, the lead author of the study. “How many people are actually asked: ‘How is the cooking or grocery shopping going? Are you eating O.K.?’ ”

In response, she founded Culinary Grief Therapy, which uses demonstrations and group discussions over meals to teach participants how to cook, eat and shop for one, alongside other widows. She runs training sessions and attends conferences, [helping other community centers and bereavement groups](#) develop their own versions of the program.

Ms. Zawadzki is one of 30 or so widows who come every few weeks to a large industrial kitchen at the College of DuPage here in Glen Ellyn. Participants learn straightforward recipes with minimal ingredients, from Laura Lerdal and David Kramer, who are chefs with the program: roasted vegetables tossed in olive oil and salt, a simple roast chicken, single-pan pasta. A Tuesday-night session in August centered on barbecue.

“In the beginning, I just didn’t want to cook. I’d make a bowl of cereal,” said Diane Kantak, 78, who shared a cooking station with Ms. Zawadzki. Ms. Kantak had been married for 54 years when her husband, Francis, died in 2013.

The two women chatted as they chopped. Ms. Zawadzki helped an older woman near her station pry the lid off a jar, and ducked cheerfully as someone passed a colander over her head. When the group sat down to eat, many spoke about how hard it could be merely to plan a menu.



Widows work together to cook and prepare food. Sometimes, seasoned cooks like Beverly Geiger help friends learn to hold a knife or check when meat is done. Credit...Taylor Glascock for The New York Times

“It’s simple things like, ‘What do you want for dinner?’ ” said Pat Smith, 60. “And it’s like, ‘I don’t know. What do I want for dinner?’ ”

Ms. Zawadzki agreed: “You don’t have somebody to bounce your ideas off anymore.”

“And then you think to yourself,” Ms. Kantak said, “ ‘How do you not know what you want for dinner?’ ”

She paused. “But that’s something the two of you would have decided together.”

For partners who weren't the main cook, especially older men, widowhood poses a new set of challenges. Many moved straight from their mother's food to their spouse's, and know only a few recipes.

"I've still got her spices in the cabinet," said Johnnie Footman, who is in his 70s, at a recent meeting of a [bereavement group for men](#) at Calvary Hospital in the Bronx. "I leave them there as a memento, even though I don't use them."

Like many participants at the Calvary group, Mr. Footman has been widowed for a few years. This meeting specifically dealt with food issues, but the men have been gathering for years, sharing intimate details of their grief.



For Vincent Collazzi, his relationship with his wife was "46 years of total bliss." Since she died five years ago, he has struggled to cook. Credit...Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

"The microwave has bailed me out," said Vincent Collazzi, 75, to chuckles and nods from the others. "I don't use the stove, but I do miss the meals."

Sitting around the table together, talking about what happened during the day: This is what many widows say they miss the most. Some eat on the couch or at restaurants. Without a spouse sitting opposite, the kitchen table can feel unbalanced, a seesaw for one.

"That has to be relearned," said R. Benjamin Cirlin, the executive director of the [Center for Loss & Renewal](#), a bereavement practice in Manhattan. "Time has to be relearned, now that time of eating is really a sign of one's changed identity."



“I still don’t cook,” said Marie Bright, pictured at her home in Brooklyn. Her husband, Roger, died last year. She wears his jewelry still, sleeps in his T-shirts and keeps his smiling face as the background of her iPhone. Sometimes, she kisses the screen, which is smudged with her lipstick. Credit...Sasha Maslov for The New York Times

Marie Bright’s husband, Roger, died last year. They ate breakfast together every day at a wooden table in their apartment near Prospect Park in Brooklyn; each would wait until the other was home to eat dinner, even if it meant enduring a grumbling stomach.

Now, even when she goes out with friends, Ms. Bright, 68, still feels she has to be home by 6:30 p.m. Sometimes she orders takeout, but most nights, she’s not hungry.

“I can’t cook,” she said, her voice breaking. “I just can’t.”

For Jeanne Heifetz, the home in Park Slope, Brooklyn, that she shared with her husband, the writer [Juris Jurjevics](#), is the place where he is most present and most absent. Mr. Jurjevics died unexpectedly last November at age 75. Since then, Ms. Heifetz, 59, has been fact-checking [his third novel](#), which will be published posthumously.

“When someone dies suddenly, it’s like Pompeii,” said Ms. Heifetz, whose [artwork](#) is helping her through her grief. “It’s a moment frozen in time.”

In her refrigerator, a large hunk of Latvian bread, which Mr. Jurjevics’s sister brought them a few days before he died, still sits unfinished. There is also a bag of grapes, which he was halfway through eating; they’re probably raisins by now, she said, but she can’t bring herself to throw them out.

“It isn’t as though you spend every day making grand declarations of love for one another,” Ms. Heifetz said, her cheeks wet with tears. “It’s that daily conversation of ‘I’m going to the Key Food, what would you like me to pick up for you?’ ”



Laurie Burrows Grad, 75, sits down to a roasted chicken dinner in her Los Angeles home. A cookbook author, she included nine recipes with advice on cooking for one in the book she wrote after her husband, Peter Grad, died four years ago. Credit...Sally Ryan for The New York Times

Restaurants are hard. Church is hard. Social life is hard.

“I have been demoted to lunch,” Laurie Burrows Grad, 75, the author of “[The Joke’s Over, You Can Come Back Now](#),” wrote about [adjusting to life](#) without her husband. Before, she said, her friends would have had them over for dinner, a couple among couples. For a while, she ate only chocolate and popcorn, savoring the spice and the crunch. A lifelong cook, she said chopping onions in her Los Angeles home soothed her.

Some widows have gained weight, others have lost. Deborah Stephens, 64, who lives in Irmo, S.C., has dropped 71 pounds since her husband, David, died nearly two years ago. For months, she would go entire days on a cup of coffee in the morning and a cheese stick in the afternoon. She could barely get 500 calories in. Her throat was too constricted to swallow.

“Food was the last thing that I wanted,” Ms. Stephens said.

Her husband had loved to eat, she said, and she had loved to cook for him. When they moved his hospice bed into the kitchen so he could die at home, it felt right to her.

“I’m no longer Mrs. David Stephens,” she said. “Now, I’m Debbie Stephens. I am trying to find out who I am.”



“After David died, I didn’t want to eat,” said Deborah Stephens, who has been a widow for almost two years and finds her home in Irmo, S.C., painfully empty without her husband. “I’d sit with a fork and then I’d push food around. Food just had no appeal to me at all.” Credit...Sean Rayford for The New York Times

Taste itself can feel like a betrayal. One partner is left behind with the things of life — the smell of mushrooms sautéing in butter, a favorite chipped blue mug — while the other doesn’t get to anymore.

“It’s so hard for me to look at a beautiful bag of cherries and think that he should have them, he should be able to enjoy them,” Ms. Heifetz said.

To help widows through their grief and sense of identity loss, Ms. Nickrand, the founder of Culinary Grief Therapy, hands out a cheat sheet, [now released as a book](#), to class participants to help them cook again. One suggestion is “Keep it Simple: Avoid causing additional work for yourself such as using paper plates to eliminate doing dishes.” Another is “Change Routines: Consider having your meals at a different time of the day, in a different room, or serving foods you typically did not have.”

When Ms. Zawadzki grew frustrated with all the food she was wasting, Ms. Nickrand suggested she ask for smaller portions from the baker or the butcher.

“And I go, ‘Really?’ And she goes, ‘Yeah,’ ” Ms. Zawadzki recalled. “And son of a gun, I was so stunned when I asked someone for only a few slices of bread, and they said, ‘Oh, sure.’ ”

She felt better that she wasn’t wasting anything, she said. Her mother had raised her to clean her plate. When she couldn’t, it felt like a double punch.

Every year, on the anniversary of their first date, Ms. Zawadzki goes to the same little restaurant they went to when she was 15. She orders a chocolate ice cream soda and a turkey BLT, which they ate on that day more than 50 years ago, and sits there, thinking about him.

“He’s probably looking down saying, ‘Really Michele? Really?’ ” she said, laughing. “But it works for me. I’m holding onto those memories, and I’m finally able to laugh with him again.”

The group does something similar: They honor their spouses in a favorite meal, part vigil, part traveling dinner. Each widow cooks next to a framed picture of her partner, and maybe a candle.

As they eat, they share memories, honoring one another’s loved ones. You need to eat to live, they remind each other, and you need to keep on living.