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## Saying goodbye

 **The Story**

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*Grief is a different experience for everyone.*

Though she will never stop missing him, Mary Michele Gordin has learned to live without her husband.

Michele's husband died suddenly eight years ago in a motorcycle accident. Rather than a long, drawn-out sickness - where she could have prepared for the loss -- he passed away in a flash.

It was a sudden change for Michele.

There were times when she felt like he would just come walking in the front door of their home. Sometimes, it seemed as though he wasn't actually gone forever.

Because of this experience, Michele can relate to those who participate in her bereavement groups with the TideWell Grief Education and Support Center, where she holds the title of grief specialist. Most of those who attend are widows and widowers struggling to redefine themselves after the loss of a loved one.

There is no set timeframe on the grieving process. Everyone is different, and missing a loved one after they have passed is only natural. It's a question of when those in mourning can get on with their normal daily lives.

"We work to adjust and adapt to our situation so that we can move on in life," Michele said. "But we never get over losing our loved one."

'Out there alone'

For Lorra Dorr, losing her husband Oscar was expected, but nonetheless traumatic. He spent eight years fighting prostate cancer, and during that time, Dorr went through her own sense of loss, even before he passed away.

"I feel like I've been more or less in the grieving process (for years)," Dorr said, "even though some days you are in denial, that you don't want to accept that this is going to happen."

Anticipatory grief is common, particularly among spouses who act as caretakers, Michele said.

"You kind of anticipate a loss, but you don't know when it's going to happen," she said. "You're trying every day to take care of your loved one, but you're on the edge of your seat. It's an anxiety kind of stress."

Lorra and her husband were active members of the community. Like most couples, they went everywhere and did everything together. After 44 years of marriage, it wasn't Oscar or Lorra, it was Oscar and Lorra -- a package deal.

"You're used to doing things as a couple and deciding things as a couple," Lorra said.

Now Lorra must rediscover herself and redefine who she is, without her husband at her side.

"When you're invited to a gathering or something, it feels funny not to have that partner with you," she said. "It's a strange feeling. Of course you see other partners together, and it's kind of strange to be out there alone."

There are also new responsibilities, said Samira Beckwith, CEO of Hope Hospice in Fort Myers. Perhaps a husband loses his wife, and he must learn how to cook.

"In addition to all of these emotions that are going on, there are also a number of practical issues that people are faced with for the first time," Samira said, "and they can be overwhelmed during this period of time."

To compensate for her grieving, Lorra has decided she won't make any major decisions for at least a year, until she has fully come to terms with Oscar's death. When she feels the time is right, she'll move on.

Continuing the legacy

When Michele lost her husband, it was traumatic. He was nine years younger, and only 42.

Michele decided she didn't want to let go of her husband, so she thought about the qualities he had that she admired most -- the things that maybe she wasn't so good at.

Michele always appreciated her husband's compassion for people, and his work ethic. And so she made an effort to adopt those strengths in herself. That way, his legacy can live on every day.

"Maybe I didn't have as much of that," she said. "But I worked hard on that to bring in some of his qualities, so I can take him with me."

E-mail: [nhughes@sun-herald.com](mailto:nhughes@sun-herald.com)

By NEIL HUGHES

Staff Writer

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