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## Life after loss

Support group formed for those whose spouses died suddenly

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### Getting on With Life

A group linking people widowed by heart disease, stroke or any other sudden death to resources, education and social connections.

Meetings from 7 to 9 p.m. the third Tuesday of the month, starting Sept. 20 UMass Medical School, Room S1-123, 55 Lake Ave. North, Worcester  
Contact Barbara Kupfer at (508) 757-6851 or [Barbara.kupfer@excite.com](mailto:Barbara.kupfer@excite.com) or Roger Fitch at (508) 829-6243

A social support group for active adults over 40 who have lost a partner, whether the loss was sudden or after a long illness and regardless of how recently widowed, parental status, or religious affiliation, race or ethnicity. First meeting is from 7 to 8:30 p.m. tomorrow

Jewish Family Service of Worcester Inc., 646 Salisbury St., Worcester  
Contact Elaine Kapperman at (508) 755-3101 or Barbara Kupfer at (508) 757-6851

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**WORCESTER**— Barbara J. Kupfer keeps a thick black binder on her coffee table. Tucked into the first plastic page is her husband’s obituary. Tributes and letters of condolence, from his many fellow scientists and even one from the man who moved him into two offices, fill page after page. But in between the newspaper clippings and the sympathy cards are printouts of all the e-mails David Kupfer sent and received the day before he died.

“He looked so good,” Mrs. Kupfer said. “We danced the night before.”

The e-mails — last-minute checks on a manuscript and plans for vacation during the December holidays — remind her of how suddenly life can end. Her husband died of a heart attack on Dec. 11. Her life as she knew it ended that day, too, in ways only those who have experienced such a sudden loss can know.

That conviction — that only those who have lost a spouse so quickly can truly understand what it means — is the driving force behind a support group she and five others widowed by sudden heart attacks have created. Called Life After Sudden Loss, its purpose is to offer resources, education and social connections to people whose spouses have died of heart attack, stroke or any other sudden death.

“We all have the same issues,” she said. “When you lose someone suddenly, you don’t have time to talk about anything.”

Mrs. Kupfer spoke at the Tatnuck Bookseller cafe, where she and four other people who form the core of the fledgling group gathered to plan their next step.

They all agreed they never got to say goodbye.

“You don’t have the opportunity to reflect on the good times. You don’t have the opportunity to resolve old issues,” said Roger A. Fitch of Holden, whose wife, Lynne, died in March. “You’re left with a protracted feeling of loss of control and a sensation of being battered.”

Roberta Carlin of Westboro, whose husband, Bruce, died last October, said time doesn’t heal. She tried bereavement groups, but found no one who could understand her situation.

“I was so lost, they could not help me. I met some nice people but it wasn’t until I met Barbara, who said we have to start a group, that I felt I got help,” she said.

Rosalie LaFrance of Sutton attended a hospice-sponsored bereavement group for 21 months, where she met Mrs. Kupfer and Dori Kehowski of Millbury. Her husband, Donald L. LaFrance, died in November 2003.

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"I was just looking for companionship," Mrs. LaFrance said. "You're so devastated."

Mrs. Kehowski, whose husband, John, died in February, values being able to call on others in the new group, knowing they'll understand her concerns.

"You have no energy to think about doing something important," she said. "If you have a bad day and something's bugging you, they kind of help you see the light."

Harriet Butler of Southboro lost her husband, Bob Butler, to a heart attack in October. He called from his cell phone on the way to the doctor to say, "I am OK, don't worry about me." The friend who was driving him said he passed out as soon as he put the phone down.

"Life for us all has changed, and it is comforting to know we support each other emotionally," she said in an e-mail message last week because she was unable to attend the group's meeting. "If we need to cry, it's OK."

That freedom is crucial, Mr. Fitch said.

"There are things you can say in this group that you can't say to family or in the community," he said. "These people grant you the permission."

At the cafe and a week later when they met at Mrs. Kupfer's Worcester home to share Chinese food, they talked about what it was like to find their loved ones already dead. They joked about passing out death certificates like greeting cards when tackling practical matters of bills and insurance. What should they do with all the clothes? How are their children handling their grief? Does working provide welcome distraction? Who's been able to eat normal meals again?

And then there are the tough days to come, like anniversaries or birthdays or holidays.

"My most important link isn't going to be there," Mrs. Kehowski said. "We don't want to celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas, but we have to do it for the grandchildren. I'd rather stay under the covers."

Mrs. Carlin has warned her family she won't be cooking for Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, next month. It falls too near the first-year anniversary of her husband's death.

Mr. Fitch is glad his grandchildren will be celebrating their birthdays around the one-year mark for his wife's death.

As they cope with emotional minefields, they also share how they deal with unwelcome chores. They've all had to consider selling their spouses' cars. One had to learn how to balance a checkbook. Mrs. LaFrance had to figure out which customers her husband, a locksmith who ran his own business, had billed for his services.

The group will invite experts to speak at their monthly meetings, which will be held on the third Tuesday of the month at University of Massachusetts Medical School, starting Sept. 20.

The first presentation will be given by the American Heart Association, which was where Mrs. Kupfer and Mrs. Carling first turned when they were seeking a group they ultimately had to invent.

The AHA's Central Massachusetts division offered assistance, suggesting sessions on financial planning and heart disease to start with, followed by whatever participants later identify as their interests or needs, said Kimberly Salmon, the division's executive director. The point is to help people take charge of their altered lives, including their own health.

"Typically, when you've lost someone, your own health goes. You push it aside and don't focus on that," she said.

In the group's two recent planning meetings, the conversations flitted from sorrowful to pragmatic and back again. That's what's so appealing about this group, Mr. Fitch said.

"You can slip in and out of conversation comfortably without getting embarrassed," he said. "That's certainly not the case even with concerned friends and co-workers."

Even people who have suffered other kinds of losses, such as a spouse dying of cancer, bring different needs, each person in the group said. While they wondered how hard it must be to care for someone whose illness is protracted and whose death is expected, they also imagined that the grieving begins sooner.

Dr. Stephen Slaten, executive director of the Jewish Family Service in Worcester and a clinical psychologist, said grief follows an individual course.

"Some people don't necessarily want to go to a classic grief support group to talk about their loss," he said. "Some people do want to find a way to connect more with people who have had a comparable experience and find it easier to understand."

For those who want something more than to talk about their loss, there is another new group, also initiated by Barbara Kupfer, that will meet at the Jewish Family Service on Salisbury Street. Called "Getting on With Life," its target group is active adults over 40 who have lost a partner and look forward to resuming a social life without feeling "different" because of their widowhood.

The focus is on activities people might be missing — movies, trips, dining — now that their partner has died.

At Mrs. Kupfer's house, Mrs. Carlin was telling the group that she had visited a medium, part of her despair at having not said goodbye to her husband.

"I'm searching," she said. "There's an emptiness I have inside that hurts. I'm just trying to fill that emptiness. It was too quick."

She was peppered with questions about what the medium said — and how much it cost. Mrs.

Kupfer was skeptical but respectful.

“That’s not for me. But you have to do what you feel,” she said. “I get more satisfaction with bringing everybody together.”

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