

5 Tips for Surviving V-Day

- ✖ Although Valentine's Day is meant to celebrate love, it can bring bittersweet memories and pain.

For kids, **Valentine's Day** is a time to exchange funny cards and eat boxes of chocolate. For adults, it's often much more than just a time to send flowers and buy heart jewelry, chocolates and cards—it's a time to rededicate your love to one special person. But when you're a widow or widower, or have lost your love due to an unfortunate life circumstance, Cupid's arrow can pierce your heart in a very different way. What was once a holiday of "warm fuzzies" can turn into a sorrowful day to overcome.

It's true that Valentine's Day holds significance for most couples, but it was particularly special for my husband Gordon and me. After losing my father in February, the whole season had become fraught with painful memories. Then a young man with a lot of heart came into my life, and it just so happened that Valentine's Day was right after our first date. When I got home from work, Gordon had left a bouquet of pink carnations on my front porch. So, it became a yearly ritual for us to use Valentine's Day as the anniversary of our first date together.

Because **Valentine's Day** held so many precious memories, I

still find the holiday difficult to get through, even though it's been five years since my husband died. Red hearts and sappy songs on the radio can highlight loss as easily as they can inspire ardor.

If you are facing this Valentine's Day by yourself, perhaps for the first time, here are some thoughts that might make the day easier to navigate.

Prepare in advance. Maybe it's true that ignorance is bliss. Even if you wanted to forget about the existence of "V-Day," our consumer-driven culture wouldn't let you. Yes, I know you wish you could just hide under a rock until the last conversation heart has disappeared. But ignoring Feb. 14 will only work until you see displays of Valentine's cards in the store, or see the florist busily making the rounds. Survival requires looking deep inside yourself to determine what you might do to make this holiday less painful. There is no secret formula—we're all different—but try to focus on the fact that it's just one day.

Know what to avoid. Yes, it's important to stay integrated into the outside world, and to remember the rituals and traditions you and your sweetheart shared with each other. But consider the possibility that Valentine's Day might not be the best time to do either. I advise you to stay away from restaurants. For one thing, have you ever tried to get a table on Valentine's Day? The word crowded takes on a whole new

meaning. Beyond that,
though, the empty place across the table will cast a pall on
any pleasant
feelings you've managed to work up. Along those lines, avoid
any of the 'old
favorites' that might be painful. Order take-out or cook at
home, but don't fix
that special dinner you used to make with the person you
loved.

Stay busy. Chances are you've heard advice similar to
the following: *Get out of the house! He wouldn't want you to
stop living
your own life.* And while such insights might not always be
what you want to
hear, they are underpinned with truth. If you're dreading the
rush of painful
emotions and memories that Valentine's Day will bring, try to
plan an activity
that will take your mind off of things. I recommend you
schedule some quality
time with friends and family. Play some board or card games
rather than
watching movies, unless there isn't a hint of romance in them.
This is
definitely one day when romance can be very painful. Instead,
focus on a new
project that you really enjoy, such as redecorating your home.

Allow the emotions to come. Remember that grief never
fits into a neat timetable, and that it's unhealthy to pretend
that
everything's OK when it's not. No matter how prepared you
think you are or how
much of your life you think you may have rebuilt after

suffering a devastating
loss, grief can still bowl you over with emotion. Valentine's
Day is especially
tough because not only do you have to deal with your own
memories, but your
senses are constantly assaulted, too. Try not to focus on the
flowers and
hand-holding and candy. Remember that it's OK to cry. Let the
emotions
come-just try to keep them from overwhelming you. Depending on
how you feel,
you might write a love poem or letter to the one whom you are
grieving. The
point is that it's OK to remember those whom you loved and
lost.

Turn your love to other treasures. Although
Valentine's Day is largely marketed to lovers, it isn't
limited to them-in
fact, far from it. Feb. 14 is a time to focus on anyone and
everyone
whom you love, such as your children and grandchildren and
friends. Love comes
in many different kinds of relationships. Celebrate those,
even though the loss
of the person with whom you were passionate still hurts. In
fact, why not buy a
box of the old, simple Valentines you distributed as a child
and send one to
each of your friends? Every day is a good day to tell those
whom you love how
you feel. And don't forget to love yourself in the process.

Although I have rebuilt my life and moved on, my memories of
Valentine's Days past with Gordon continue to hold a special

place in my heart.

As much as possible, try to focus on all of the blessings you still have in your life, and on all of the love that you still enjoy. Life is always a combination of good and bad. We should all appreciate the good, and know that when bad things happen in our lives the only way forward is to take one small step at a time. And remember that one heart still beats and must survive."

Joni James Aldrich

offers some more heartfelt advice to help comfort those who are grieving a

lost loved one in her books The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N

Against Cancer and The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm

Called "Grief," available at bookstores nationwide and from major online booksellers.