

Wall Street Journal, 7/31/18
"After Tragedy, How Survivors Cope"

Tia Coleman [lost her husband, their three children](#) and five other members of her husband's family when an amphibious tour boat sank during a storm.

In the days following the July 19 accident, she wondered how she would go home to an empty house. "I don't know how I am going to do it," she said.

How does anyone survive a loss so great?



In the days after the July 19 tragedy, survivor Tia Coleman spoke about the loss of nine family members on Table Rock Lake in Branson, Mo.



Seen shortly before the boat tour, Tia Coleman, left back, and her nephew Donovan Hall, center right in red shirt, were the only two who survived the sinking.

PHOTOS: JOHN SLEEZER/TNS/ZUMA PRESS; THE COLEMAN FAMILY

Everyone experiences loss, but it usually follows the natural order, with death coming at the end of a long life, says Robert Neimeyer, a professor at the University of Memphis and practicing psychologist who specializes in grief. When people face multiple, untimely losses, assumptions about being able to protect those we love, about fairness and, if religious, about God's mercy are called into question.

"There are the terrible tangible losses of the presence of people in their lives, but also the intangible losses of a sense of security, justice and control," he says.

Susan Burns lost her mother, her daughter-in-law and 6-month-old-granddaughter in a 2016 car crash that critically injured her father. Her mother, Lois Burke, had lived nine-tenths of a mile away and was her best friend, Ms. Burns says. Her daughter-in-law, Cortney, and granddaughter, Paisleigh, were living with her while her son was in the military.

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Susan Burns with her mother Lois Burke, who died in a 2016 car crash.



Ms. Burns's daughter-in-law Cortney Shandell Hill and granddaughter Paisleigh died in the same accident.

PHOTOS: SUSAN BURNS(2)

Her hometown Portal, Ga., a small community, rallied around the family. The local grocery store delivered a truckload of paper goods. A friend loaned a camper for visiting relatives. The owner of Pepper Jack's Deli & Grill, who called her parents Mom and Dad, brought over dinners. That was comforting. So, too, was her faith. Ms. Burns says her mother always told her not to weep when she died because she would be where she "strived to be."

Still, in the months that followed, Ms. Burns became depressed and withdrawn. Her father spent 35 days in a Savannah hospital, 80 miles away. During that time, she woke, took her other son, then 12, to school, drove to the hospital, came home in time to pick up her son, got dinner and went to bed, exhausted and not wanting to talk to anyone.

Her husband, who drove a truck, would call to see how she was and ask if she wanted to talk about anything. "No, I'm good," was her standard reply. She worried

about distracting him while he was driving and burdening him with her own pain. "He was trying his best to be there for me," she says. "I shut him out." Finally, on Valentine's Day, driving home from church, he said he wanted her to talk to him. "I cried and cried and cried," she says, telling him everything she was feeling. Her advice to others: "Don't shut out the people who care and love you."

About 10% of the bereaved might experience prolonged grief disorder, a clinical diagnosis describing people who are so preoccupied by those who have died that it makes it hard for them to function, Dr. Neimeyer says.

Many people, though, realize their own strength, having survived the very worst, he says. Often, they become more empathetic and wiser, with a deeper appreciation of what matters most in life, especially those around them.

Resilient people share certain traits, Dennis Charney, a psychiatrist and expert in neurobiology, and Steven Southwick, a psychiatry professor at Yale University, found in their book "Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges." Among them are: optimism, altruism, spirituality and acceptance of what can't be changed.

Deborah Derman was with her 16-month-old son waiting at a local airport to greet her parents when the small plane piloted by her father crashed in front of her. Her parents and two passengers were killed. She doesn't remember how she made it home. Four years later, in 1992, her husband died of a heart attack while playing rugby, leaving her a young widow with two small children and pregnant with her third. She remembers being despondent, lying in bed and calling her sister, who told her, "One day this will be your past." At that moment, she says, she decided to begin trying to think of life's possibilities.

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Deborah Derman, who witnessed the airplane crash that killed her parents, and four years later lost her husband to a fatal heart attack, says it's important to cry, take small steps and only do what feels right for you. PHOTO: REGINA MILLER/ORIGIN PHOTOGRAPHY

She earned a doctorate, specializing in grief and bereavement, remarried, and raised her three children. A professional grief counselor in suburban Philadelphia, she counseled families who lost loved ones in 9/11 and published an adult coloring book, "Colors of Loss & Healing." Each picture contains a single word, such as "tears" and "determination" that helped her get through her own grief. Across from each picture is a blank page for keeping a journal, something she did after her husband died.

Having a purpose, even in the midst of tragedy and profound grief, often helps sustain people who have experienced unspeakable losses.

Madonna Badger found such purpose, and with it hope and an ability to love again. Ms. Badger, a Manhattan advertising executive, lost her three daughters and her parents in a Christmas morning fire in 2011 that she escaped, the tragedy heavily covered in the media. She was divorced at the time.

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Madonna Badger, right, and her ex-husband Matthew Badger, at the January 2012 funeral of their three



daughters, who were killed along with Ms. Badger's parents in a Christmas morning fire.



Ms. Badger, founder and chief creative officer of Badger & Winters, spoke in April 2017 during the Women in the World Summit in New York.

PHOTOS: SETH WENIG/ASSOCIATED PRESS; RICHARD DREW/ASSOCIATED PRESS

She was suicidal and treated at several trauma and psychiatric centers before going to the Psychiatric Research Institute at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences in Little Rock. There, she met a doctor who helped her understand the depth of her loss. The bond between mother and child, he told her, is the strongest there is and like a giant nerve. Hers was severed three times. She didn't need to be in a mental institution, he said. She needed time. "That gave me something I could hold onto," she says. "That was the beginning of my whole journey."

She met with monks, priests and rabbis, among other spiritual leaders, and realized that she wasn't being punished. The fire happened. She was still the mother of her three girls, Lily, and twins Grace and Sarah, and the daughter of Lomer and Pauline Johnson. Their love didn't perish and she needed to live life with purpose to honor them.

After returning to Badger & Winters, the firm she co-founded, Ms. Badger launched a campaign #WomenNotObjects, to stop objectification of females in advertising and marketing. "I want to make a difference in the world for girls and women," she says.

Seven years after her loss, Ms. Badger, says the pain never goes away, but she has learned to cope and not let it fill her days. She stays away from parks filled with children.

Having for so long shut people out for fear of loving and losing them, she has allowed her friends and love back into her life. Ms. Badger remarried four years ago.

RECOVERING FROM LOSS

- Take care of yourself. Grief, especially from multiple losses, is mentally, physically and emotionally draining. Get enough sleep and eat well. Don't turn to drugs or alcohol to relieve pain.
- Ask for help and accept it. If you need someone to pick up the kids, ask. If a neighbor offers to cut the grass, grocery shop, wash clothes, say yes. People often want to help but don't know what to do.
- Talk. Find someone—a friend, partner, family member, religious, professional—you can confide in and will be patient and willing to listen to your deepest feelings.
- Spend time thinking about the special relationship with each person who died, grieving them individually. Share stories and photos. Find a project that in some way honors their lives.
- Talk positively to yourself. Say over and over, "I will get through this, I can do this."
- Take a break. Be willing to step away from grief, go for a walk, garden, sketch, ride a bike.