



# The Journey

For Families of Fallen Firefighters

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Healing is a process you participate in. It isn't something done to you.  
Healing is an inside job.

~ Lucia Capacchione

**Y**ou know that old saying, *Time heals all wounds*? It is generally attributed to the Greek poet Menander, who lived around 300 B.C. Maybe some things have been lost in translation, but it's safe to say that most people who have experienced grief would beg to disagree. Time alone does not heal everything. Some things don't heal completely, can't be fixed. For most people, grieving the death of a loved one is not something that is ever neatly wrapped up and put away. It changes over time, it ebbs and flows, and it has different seasons. But this we know is true: *Grief Takes Time*.

Grief also takes work. It requires us to adjust to a new reality and to change the way we think, the way

we act, the way we relate to other people. Often, grief involves adjusting to a new version of ourselves. It can be tempting to just give up and let life happen to us, but at some point, we have to decide to survive and to take action in that direction. We have to figure out what we want our life to be. Not the life we had, but the one we have now. "Grief work" looks different for different people. Some people change their location, their career, their relationships, their focus, their goals. The death of someone who is central to our lives often sets us on a new trajectory.

This issue features two pieces, about the time and the work of grief, from people who are living it.

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## The Second Year

*By Jennifer Osler-Bolton, Wife of Ryan Osler (2016-CA)*

**M**y husband, Ventura County Fire Engineer Ryan Osler, died in the line of duty in 2016.

In addition to the overwhelming emptiness typically expected with loss, we anticipate the difficulties of the first year and the milestones that year will force upon us. The first holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and celebrations without our person await us on the calendar, days we expect to be tender and milestones we predict will be difficult. But nobody really talks about that second year, and I was surprised to find that the second year of loss felt more difficult than the first.

The first year of loss is full of expectation that it will be hard, and we expect that once we live through the first year, we've made it. The following years will be easier now that we've lived through all the firsts.

We mentally prepare our hearts for the first year, and we think we are mentally prepared for the second. We don't expect the second year to be more difficult than the first. But the confirmation of the loss becomes more prominent, and the depth in which we feel the emptiness becomes deeper, because now it's really true: he's not here, and life continues on.

And people expect you to be done grieving. People hear "two years," and they assume that by now, the griever should be "moving on" or done talking about the loss. But the truth is, the griever might actually be hurting more than they themselves expected.

I knew this fact about grief. I learned it through the Grief Recovery Method before I was a griever. It made sense

*continued on page 2*

**Osler-Bolton** *continued from page 1*

when I heard it, but it wasn't until I became the griever living through the second year that I realized how true that statement can be. I cried more for Ryan in the second year of loss than I had throughout the first. My heart felt more broken than I expected. The need and want for my husband consumed my every thought.

And it's normal. It's OK.



*Jennifer, Ryan, and their children*

Be gentle with yourself if you're walking through that second year. You may think, "It's been two years. Enough already." But your heart may be thinking, "It's been two years. I wasn't ready."

Every journey of grief is different because every heart is different. Be patient and kind to yourself. Don't assume that "by now" you should be done with the heartache of your loss. Because the truth is, your heart didn't expect it either.

## Get Comfortable with Death to Enjoy Living

*By Sarah Ferrell Horwich, Wife of Mark E. Horwich (2020-WV)*

**M**y husband, Mark, died in the line of duty on January 11, 2020. I kissed him goodbye as he left the house, and a few hours later a member of the department, accompanied by his daughter (a nurse) and two EMTs, was in my living room telling me Mark was dead. Our daughter was nine months old. She will never know her dad. That, specifically, is what I remember wailing over and over, and I distinctly remember one of the EMTs who was standing off to the side of the room becoming visibly choked up at the scene in front of him.

How did we get here? How does something like this happen? I'm writing this during the anniversary week of his death. In the past four years, I have become intimately familiar with the accident report with all its time stamps and details. I have poured over his autopsy report to fully understand what happened. I have asked medical professionals for clarification on terminology I did not understand. I have been asked to log into his Fitbit account to see if it showed the exact time his heart stopped beating. In this case it wasn't "which came first, the chicken or the egg," but "which came first, the accident or the cardiac event?" Frankly, we won't ever truly know the exact order of events that day, although we can make educated guesses. And by "we," I mean all the officials who have been involved in this process. Imagine having your health history, intimate details of your wellbeing and physical body dissected (quite literally by an autopsy, but also figuratively) by total strangers throughout governmental agencies and the legal system. How violating!

Except, he is dead.

These things took place because Mark left behind a wife and three children. We share one biological child, and Mark had two children prior. Now, what if I die? Because it is now glaringly apparent that death can happen at any point in time, even to those who seem healthy. What if I died suddenly? How would that affect my child?

I did not willingly step onto this emotional rollercoaster; however, the turmoil has wreaked havoc on my physical body and my mental state daily for almost four years. It was tearing me apart in the unhealthiest ways—anxiety and fear, feeling paralyzed, obsession over food choices. Would eating *that* clog my arteries and make me die early?!

It took two-and-a-half years for the legalities to mostly get settled, and by "mostly," I mean approved by an administrative law judge before all the appeals began...

In May 2022, I decided to treat myself with a membership to the local YMCA and signed up for personal training sessions. At the time, I wanted to lose a few pounds and feel better, maybe even gain some muscle definition. I didn't really have any clear goals in mind. I just knew I needed to do something, because what I was doing was not healthy or helpful and certainly was not making me feel good.

What I did not count on was how this would kick off the journey to really understanding my own mortality, getting comfortable with the fact that, yes, I will die, and understanding my own health, which affects how I am LIVING.



Working with my trainer sparked an interest in how my body moves. How muscles, bones, joints, and organs all work together. How movement affects my brain, my emotions, my mental health. (It has a positive effect, in case you were wondering.) I got certified as a personal trainer and am currently working toward certification as a nutrition and health coach. I have sought out a health care team who listens to me and has helped me resolve some underlying health issues which had for years made me feel just “not good” even though I was healthy by an annual physical exam standard. I have pushed myself physically just to see what I am capable of, and it is more than I ever imagined I could handle.

I do not miss the panic attacks in the night, sitting up abruptly in bed gasping for air, heart racing and soaked in sweat. Now I sleep well thanks to a nutritious diet and some invigorating exercise and from lots of counseling to help with adapting to changes that I did not choose. Finding out that memory loss is a typical and normal response to a traumatic event was comforting. I was not getting dementia! Not being able to remember names and phone numbers, or forgetting words mid-sentence, is a normal neurological response which usually gets better. Thankfully, it did get better.

I sought out an estate attorney to make a will and an estate plan so my child is taken care of if I die before she becomes a legal adult. I had difficult conversations with family to determine who will take custody of her if I die. I certainly hope and pray I am around to see her grow into an adult with her own life, interests, and family. But if I don't, a plan is in place. This has helped ease some anxiety.

What does this have to do with grief? Everything! My husband is dead. I miss him. But he isn't coming back, and that isn't changing. Time goes on. I am still living. My daughter needs her mother, and she needs her mother to be in good health and fully present.



*Sarah Ferrell Horwich and her daughter.*

About a year after Mark died, one of my good friends asked me what brings me joy. At that time, I could not answer her, and that hurt. I had to make a literal, physical list of the things I enjoyed, or thought I enjoyed. Then I just started working through it. Reading, writing, learning new things, and health and fitness bring me a great deal of joy. I didn't list my daughter, because that is a given! It has been extra fun to do these things with her and to see her love of reading blossom. Also, to see her love of barbells develop.

There are times that I feel guilty for enjoying my life. I mean, I feel GOOD! Probably the best I have ever felt in my life, physically and emotionally. Things are very good right now. I am enjoying watching my daughter grow and develop a strong personality. I am making friends and meeting very interesting people. We have started a homeschooling journey and have found an incredible, supportive homeschool community. I am even teaching a class in one of the co-ops we joined. We do sports and dance and arts and crafts.

Life. Is. Good.

And this makes me feel guilty. Because that is how grief works. None of this specific good stuff would be happening if Mark were living. That was not the course of events. And I have to be OK with that. When those feelings of guilt creep up, I tell myself that I deserve to enjoy living.

You do, too.

A new friend confided in me that when she met me about a year and a half ago, her first impression was what a joyful person I am. What an exceptional compliment! My regret is that it took death to get me to this point.

While this is my individual story, it is not so unique that you cannot find similarities in your experience. If this inspires you to look at areas in your life where you want to make changes, good! Do it! We both know all too well we only have one opportunity.

## Support and Connection for Fire Hero Families

Join our private Facebook group for Fire Hero Families.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/NFFFireHeroFamilyPrograms>

Find resources that support adults and children who are grieving.

<https://www.firehero.org/resources/family-resources>

Join one of our virtual support groups hosted via Zoom.

### NEW! Fire Hero Teens Support Group

open to children, stepchildren, and siblings, ages 13-17, facilitated by a psychologist who specializes in providing trauma-focused support

 Weekly, 1st and 3rd Tuesday of the month, 7-8 PM (EDT)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/88CKSYR>

### Facilitated Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members, for those who are struggling with grief or do not have a strong support system; facilitated by a psychologist.

 Weekly, Tuesday, 8-9 PM (EDT)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/88CKSYR>

### Fire Hero Family Peer Support Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; meet in small groups to share experiences, encouragement, and ideas

 Weekly, Wednesday, 8-9:15 PM (EDT)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/87W8ZFY>

### Men Forging Ahead

open to adult men from the Fire Hero Family community; informal conversation and connection

 Monthly, 4th Saturday, 3-4:30 PM (EDT)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/X3IMT93>

### Monthly Remembrance Group

open to adult Fire Hero Family members; during the anniversary month of your firefighter's death, join others who are also remembering their firefighters; facilitated by a grief specialist

 Monthly, 2nd Sunday, 3-4 PM (EDT)

Register at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/PQF7X39>

If you have questions about these groups, please e-mail Erin at [ebrowning@firehero.org](mailto:ebrowning@firehero.org).



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Enacted in 1976, the Public Safety Officers' Benefits (PSOB) Programs are a unique partnership effort of the PSOB Office, Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA), U.S. Department of Justice and local, state, and federal public safety agencies and national organizations, such as the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation, to provide death, disability, and education benefits to those eligible for the Programs.

## Write About Your Journey



For those whose only child or only sibling dies, it can be especially difficult and lonely. Are you a parent with no living children or a sibling with no living siblings? What do other people need to know about how your experience is unique?

Tell us about how this affects your identity as a parent or sibling, and how it affects your relationship with others in the community of grieving people. Where have you found the best support and understanding? What are the kindest

ways people have found to remember your loved one(s)? To share your story of grief, healing, and hope, please send it, along with a high-resolution photo, by June 15, 2024, to [jwoodall@firehero.org](mailto:jwoodall@firehero.org).

If you don't use email, please submit your information to:

National Fallen Firefighters Foundation  
Attn: Jenny Woodall  
P.O. Drawer 498  
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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