

# Surviving Valentine's Day

A widow's guide to celebrating love—alone

by **Alina Larson**

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 an occasion to send flowers and buy jewelry, chocolates and cards—it's a time to rededicate your love to one special person.

But when you're a widow or widower, Cupid's arrow can pierce your heart in a very different way on February 14th. What was once a holiday of "warm fuzzies" can turn into a day of sorrow.

"If you find yourself alone on February 14th after years of celebrating with someone you loved very much, the void that you feel can be overwhelming," points out author Joni Aldrich, "It's difficult to see happy couples all around you when all you can think about is the person you have lost."

Aldrich speaks from experience. She knows grief firsthand. In 2006, she lost her husband Gordon after a two-year battle with cancer. She wrote two books about the experience: *The Saving of Gordon: Lifelines to W-I-N Against Cancer* and *The Losing of Gordon: A Beacon Through the Storm Called "Grief"* (both Cancer Lifeline Publications, 2009). In the latter, Aldrich tells the inspirational story of how she rebuilt her life after losing her husband.

Because Valentine's Day held so many precious memories, Aldrich still finds the holiday difficult, even though it's been three years since her husband died.

And she's not alone. 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, Aldrich offers 6 tips that might make the day easier to navigate.

## **1. Prepare in advance.**

Maybe it's true that ignorance is bliss. Even if you wanted to forget about the existence of "V-Day," though, our consumer-driven culture wouldn't let you. "You wish you could just hide under a rock until the last conversation heart has disappeared," says Aldrich. "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."

## **2. Know what to avoid.**

"Unless you're joined by friends or family, stay away from restaurants," Aldrich advises. "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." Another no-no? A romantic movie. Choose a comedy.

### **3. Stay busy.**

Chances are you've heard advice like "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 have more than a grain of truth. If you're dreading the rush of painful emotions and memories that Valentine's Day will bring, plan an activity that will take your mind off of things. "Schedule some quality time with friends and family," Aldrich recommends. "Play some board or card games. Focus on a new project that you really enjoy, such as redecorating your home."

### **4. Allow the emotions to come.**

Remember that grief never fits into a neat timetable, and that it's unhealthy to pretend that everything's okay 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," Aldrich observes. "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 okay to remember those whom you loved and lost."

### **5. Recognize all your relationships.**

Although Valentine's Day is largely marketed to lovers, it isn't limited to them—in fact, far from it. February 14th is a time to focus on anyone and everyone whom you love, such as your children and grandchildren and 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, says Aldrich.

### **6. Count your blessings.**

Focus on all of the blessings you still have in your life, and on all of the love that you still enjoy. We should all appreciate the good, and know that when bad things happen in our lives the only way forward is to move ahead—one small step at a time.