

Working Together to Recognise and Treat Complicated Grief

Seven years ago Dorothy, aged 55, experienced the death of her husband of 30 years. Until Arthur's death, Dorothy was very healthy, a non-drinker and non-smoker with no history of depression. Approximately two years after Arthur's death, Dorothy was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and her specialist told her that it was a result of the shock of her husband's death. Her daughter is insisting that she obtain a second opinion from a doctor because she thinks she has depression.

Dorothy and Arthur had a great family life in the suburbs with their four children. Dorothy was a stay at home mum and even when the children grew up and went to work, she still carried on this traditional role because that's the way they liked things. Arthur managed all of the finances and gave Dorothy a budget to work with each week.

Spending time outdoors with their three grandchildren was Dorothy and Arthur's favourite pastime. They would take the family camping at least four times a year and Dorothy and Arthur regularly went fishing together in their boat. They maintained a permanent caravan close to the lakeside town where their grandchildren lived, so that they could spend more time with them and take them on some of their fishing trips.

When he was 18, Arthur had been rejected from the Army because he had aortic valve disease. Later in life, Arthur had open heart surgery to replace the valve. Twelve months prior to his death, he had visited his specialist, who said things were going well with his heart.

While staying at their caravan, Arthur complained that he didn't feel well. He insisted that Dorothy should drive him to the hospital about half an hour away, rather than call an ambulance or bother the caravan park owners. On the way to the hospital, Arthur was hanging out the car window gasping for air. Dorothy was feeling very distressed because she was too scared to drive fast. As they arrived at the front door of the hospital, Arthur collapsed in the car. Dorothy ran in to get help, but by the time emergency staff got to the car it was obvious that Arthur had died. Dorothy continually ruminates over the scenario, and often tells her daughter that she is haunted by this memory - *"I should have rang an ambulance"*.

Since Arthur's death, despite encouragement from her family, Dorothy has not wanted to participate in any camping and fishing activities. She cries most days, with the crying and overwhelming sadness becoming more intense around birthdays, anniversaries and holidays. Despite her family's attempts to support her, she is often inconsolable when they call. Dorothy's children have tried to get her to take up some new hobbies but she says that she doesn't want to do things without Arthur, because it won't be the same and she knows she won't enjoy it alone.

Dorothy's daughter often receives phone calls from her mother, with Dorothy crying and saying *"I just don't want to be here anymore, I just want to be with Arthur"*. Dorothy says to her daughter *"when Arthur died a part of me died too, in fact all of me died and if it wasn't for you kids I wouldn't still be here"*.