

'We lost our husbands too young, but we're here for each other'

How do you cope after the love of your life dies? These three women learnt that empathy and hope are vital, so they started a national support group for widowed people. They share their stories with Kylie Stevenson



(from left) Brisbane women Carren Stapleton, Rebecca Collins and Lauren Leslie met in 2015 as recent widows, and found solace in each other's company.

Not long after Rebecca Collins met her husband, Daniel, in 2012, they knew they'd found something special. The Brisbane couple were in their early 30s when they met through an online dating site, and just 10 months later, Daniel popped the question. "He was an amazing guy," she says. "He had the best sense of humour and a heart of gold."

The pair married the following year and had just returned from their honeymoon when Daniel visited his GP with fears he

had dementia. "We knew something wasn't quite right – he'd been suffering from anxiety at work, memory loss and an inability to focus," Rebecca says.

But a diagnosis of depression shocked them both. "He said, 'But I'm not sad, I'm really happy, life couldn't be better.'" The doctor explained Daniel had a chemical imbalance in his brain and recommended medication, warning them to look out for suicidal thoughts. "I remember Dan saying, 'I would never do something like that', so we both dismissed it," she says.

Six weeks after their wedding, Daniel took his own life.

Rebecca went into shock – in just a few weeks, she'd gone from the high of planning a wedding with the man she loved to the horror of organising his funeral. Police referred her to an eight-week suicide bereavement program, but she was the only person there who'd lost a spouse.

"That group was great for understanding suicide and depression and the trauma that comes with that," she says. "But widow grief was a whole secondary layer

I didn't really get to explore until the shock of his suicide began to wear off."

Rebecca started to connect with other widows online, and found that most support groups – apart from a few on Facebook – were based in the US, including Soaring Spirits International, a grief support community for widowed people. "Even though I had wonderful family and friends who were all incredibly supportive, nobody felt the way I felt," she says. "Connecting with other widows made me feel normal."

DISCOVERING A LIFELINE

After more than a year of chatting online with other widows, Rebecca began meeting them face-to-face, first in Sydney with members of a Facebook group, then in the US where she attended Soaring Spirits' annual conference, Camp Widow.

"Meeting other widows, I felt for the first time I could talk openly about Dan's death without making people uncomfortable," she says. "It was a lifeline. There was never any judgement – just instant validation."

74%

The proportion of widowed Australians under the age of 55 that are women, according to the 2011 census.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Lauren Leslie was just 26 when her husband, James, lost his life to suicide after a long battle with depression in 2011. She says she felt as if she was "doing the whole grief thing wrong" until she began meeting other widows.

"I was getting advice from people who, in some cases, had never lost even a grandparent," the now 32-year-old says. "It was very difficult for them to just let me be sad. As soon as I started connecting with other widowed people, I started feeling stronger. They were more attuned to listening to pain without trying to fix it."

Carren Stapleton, 45, says the first 12 months after her husband, David Stevenson, suffered a fatal heart attack while at work in 2013, was "filled with blank spots". Carren and David both had children from previous marriages, and it fell to Carren to break the news to his children and to comfort her two teens.

"I was like a walking zombie," she says. But she does recall the first time she was referred to as a 'widow', about 18 months after David had passed away. "It absolutely knocked the wind out of me," she says. "I knew that's what I was, but emotionally, I couldn't get my head around it."

One night, with that word rolling around in her mind, Carren got up at 2am and Googled 'widow', and then 'widows Australia'. There she found the Facebook support group that Lauren and Rebecca had also joined.

"I started reading the posts and, seeing what other people were writing, it was the first time I thought, 'Oh my God, I am normal'. It normalised the grief process."



(above, from left) Daniel and Rebecca Collins; Lauren and James Leslie; Carren Stapleton and her husband, David Stevenson.



BUILDING A COMMUNITY

Rebecca, Lauren and Carren met in person in Brisbane in 2015, and soon after attended a widows catch-up in Cairns. "I was already starting up a charity to support widows, and Carren and Lauren came away from that catch-up and said, "That was amazing, I want every widowed person in Australia to have the opportunity to experience that," Rebecca says.

The three women attended Camp Widow in the US together in 2016, where Rebecca volunteered with Soaring Spirits. "It was a really profound experience," Carren says of the event, which offered grief support but also practical advice on

subjects such as finance and health. "There were a lot of tears, but also laughter." The three women founded First Light Widowed Association and hope to bring Camp Widow to Australia in the future. First Light offers an online forum, local networking for widowed people throughout Australia, and an online resource library to help people find local support services. "When Dan died, even getting dressed was a challenge at that time, so finding the energy to go online and research

something was incredibly hard," Rebecca says. "First Light is about helping to connect people to existing information – and the widowed community." Six years after losing James, Lauren says she still gets "dunked by waves of grief", but adds that meeting other widows had helped her gain strength. "I don't want any other 26-year-old to feel so alone and like no-one can understand what they're going through," she says. "That first year was so traumatic and could have been easier for me if something like First Light had existed." Carren agrees: "If I hadn't stumbled across the widows' group on Facebook, I don't know where I'd be today with the grieving process."

949k
The number of widowed people in Australia as of the 2011 census, which equates to 5.5% of the adult population.

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

Rebecca, who recently got engaged to her new partner, says being a widow affects her every day but she's found hope and inspiration in the company of other widows. "There's a special connection that comes with talking to another widowed person," she says. "It might sound strange, but while I'd give everything to have been able to save Dan, there have been many positive experiences in my life since losing him. Many of these have come from my friendships with widowed people. "My widowed friends are some of the strongest and bravest women I know. We appreciate life and we know what's truly important. I'm lucky to have these special people in my life." For more information about First Light, visit firstlight.org.au. If you or someone you know needs crisis support, call Lifeline on 131 114.

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