**Working with Widows**

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I still remember his enthusiasm. “So, how do you want to celebrate our 20th anniversary, Honey? Should be special. How about a Caribbean cruise? Ya know, I’m the luckiest husband to have married you, Kathleen! And I’m gonna love you forever!”

But we didn’t go on that cruise. We didn’t celebrate our special wedding anniversary either. That’s because Tom died. Yup, I became a member of the club no woman wants to join—the widows club.

It was the first week of December. The start of a happy holiday season. But that’s when my husband, my soul mate, the love of my life and I received his diagnosis in the oncologist’s office: incurable, inoperable cancer.

Two months later, right before Valentine’s Day, Tom died in my arms. Five weeks after that, my precious mother passed. And I was no stranger to death because less than two years before that, my dear daddy had died. Then wouldn’t you know it, during all this, my little cat croaked. I thought I was going crazy! Was I losing my mind? I couldn’t remember where I put my car keys. I didn’t know my social security number when I tried to fill out a form. Was I getting Alzheimer’s?

And there was sleeping at night. Or I should say not sleeping at night. I always slept on the right side of the bed, and Tom slept on the left side. But now I had the whole blasted bed to myself, and I couldn’t figure out which side to sleep on. I just kept inching over to his side. I wanted to feel his strong arms around me, and that little kiss. “Sweet dreams, Honey. See you in the morning.” But that was never, ever going to happen again. And I still couldn’t figure out which side of the bed to sleep on.

I was in a fog. My brain was out to lunch. It felt like I was in a dark tunnel back then. My dear Tom had gone on to the light, wherever that was. But I was trapped in a tunnel of darkness. Oh God, I wanted to go with him. But, of course, I could not.

Oh yeah, and then there was the money stuff. I started freakin’ about my finances. That’s right, me, a reasonably smart gal. I’ve got a PhD. I’m a certified financial planner. I was even listed in the top 100 planners across the country by a national financial magazine, and I’m going bonkers over the money!

OK, Tom’s social security check obviously wasn’t coming in anymore. His small pastor’s pension would continue for me, but it would be even smaller. And then there was our financial planning business. I didn’t know if I could continue Rehl Financial Advisors without his help. You might even say I was feeling a bit like a bag lady, which is not uncommon for new widows.

But you know what? My financial worries really lasted only a little bit. I put my financial advisor hat back on. I ran my numbers again. I talked with my own financial advisor. And I knew that, yes, of course I was going to be OK—at least financially.

I started seeing the big picture again, and that’s when I really got it! I understood that for women who don’t have a strong background in money and finances, during their time of utmost grief, it can be a very scary and difficult time. For crying out loud, I’m a professional! I do this for a living, and I felt those bag lady feelings, even though briefly.

As I came out of my initial grief and pain, it was the beginning of a big shift in my financial planning practice. I wanted to focus on widows. It also led to my writing *Moving Forward on Your Own: A Financial Guidebook for Widows*. I created this as a tool for my “widowed sisters” and as a gift that friends and professionals could give to widows.

So, what are we going to cover in our time together? Our focus is on the following:

* Shocking statistics
* Impact of grief and emotions
* Three stages of widowhood
* Advice for new widows
* Connect—best practices
* Attract and serve widowed clients
* Research on widows and money

## Shocking Statistics

It’s true that 80 percent of husbands die married, but 80 percent of women die single! That’s right, we outlive the guys.

Yes, 70 percent of all married women will experience widowhood at least once during their lifetime. If they remarry later, some of those women will be widowed again. The winner that I’ve met is a woman in her 90s who attended one of my workshops for widows, wives, and friends. She had been married four times and buried all of them. She told me, “I just love the guys so much, but I’m not getting married again!” If I were a guy, I’d be leery about hooking up with her.

Here’s another 70 percent statistic especially relevant for you. Seventy percent of widows fire the couple’s advisor after their spouse dies. Why do you think that is? Well, it might be like Anne, who came to my office shortly after the death of her spouse.

Mostly our advisor just focused on Ralph. After he died, that advisor called to say I needed to sign some paperwork at his office. Well, when I got there, he started talking about how great I should feel because I was beating the market. He pulled out some fancy investment reports and graphs that didn’t make sense to me—never did before either.

I didn’t care if I was beating the market or not. I just wanted to know if I was going to be OK. Did I have enough money? Could I still live in our house? Did I have to go back to work? Could I continue helping my granddaughter with college costs? Could I still give money to my congregation?

I felt so confused about all this money stuff, and I started crying in that advisor’s office. But then he told me not to worry my pretty little head because he would take care of everything for me.

That didn’t sit well with me. It didn’t feel right to work with him. So, I got up and left. I didn’t sign his papers either because I didn’t know what was in them. And you know what? That advisor never even said Ralph’s name. He just called him my ‘deceased spouse.’

His assistant called the next day to schedule another meeting, but I said I had a hair appointment and was busy. And then my friend, Ann, told me how much you helped when her husband died. That’s why I called. So, Kathleen, am I going to be OK financially?

When a widow leaves her advisor, her money also leaves. But guess what? That other advisor’s problem can be your golden opportunity! Imagine the possibilities for your firm to reach out and assist these underserved widows in transition. They need and want your help. Will you be the advisor fired or the one hired?

Here’s another significant fact. It’s predicted that in the coming decades, lots of money will transfer—trillions of dollars. Maybe more than $41 trillion! And, 70 percent of that money will be inherited by women—from elderly parents and deceased spouses. So that is more reason to sharpen your skills in working with widows.

## Impact of Grief and Emotions

When a woman’s husband dies, she can experience many different feelings:

* **Disbelief:** “I can’t believe he’ll never walk through that front door again.”
* **Identity:** “Who am I now that I’m not Mrs. Jim Jones? I’ve always been Mrs. Jim Jones.”
* **Anger:** “Why did you have to die, Tom? Darn it! We had everything going for us in retirement. Traveling, doing things together with the grandkids. Am I nuts? I’m angry at a dead man. Oh, Tom, I miss you so much!”
* **Loneliness:** “My house is so empty now. I think I’m going nuts. It’s too quiet. I don’t know if I can stay in this place anymore.” Or here’s another kind of loneliness. When you’re a couple, you do lots of things with other couples—backyard barbeques, celebrating birthdays, working on church committees together, attending sports games. But after you’re a widow, those invitations come less often. And soon they’re almost gone altogether. It’s like prior friends are afraid they’ll catch this death thing if they hang around you too long, just like the flu.
* **Fear:** “He’s really gone. What do I do next? I feel terrified! I don’t understand all this money stuff.”
* **Overwhelmed:** *“*It’s just too much. I don’t know if I can go through all this estate settlement paperwork.”
* **Guilt:**“I am now wealthier than when my husband was alive. All this insurance money, it’s just not right. I’ve got money to travel to Europe and do things we couldn’t afford before. I can take the grandkids to Disney for a family vacation.” For some widows, this new money becomes what I call “blood money”—they got it because their husband died. They subconsciously may try to get rid of it as fast as possible—give it away to adult children to make up for the loss of their father. Or they might spend it too freely using retail therapy to mask their pain.
* **Confusion:**“How do I shop and cook for one since Fred’s gone? I’m not even hungry!”
* **Emotionally drained:** “I’ve never felt this down in my entire life.”

So, why am I talking about a widow’s grief and stress and the accompanying emotions? How does this relate to a widow’s money issues?

You’ve seen the chart of top 100 stressors in people’s lives—moving to a new city, job change, marriage, birth of a child, etc. What’s the number one stressor? That’s right, death of a spouse.

When a widow is in the midst of deep grief, she may experience a stressful cognitive disconnect. Her brain really may act differently. Sections that control basic body functions like breathing and blood flow work OK, but higher cognitive executive functioning? Not so good. Memory is weak. Attention span is short. And decision-making is downright difficult, if not impossible.

You may have seen some very smart ladies in your office who’ve gone into total meltdown with financial matters after the death of their spouse. It could be the executive director of a nonprofit organization managing millions who suddenly can’t read her financial brokerage statement, or a math teacher who can’t balance her checkbook.

Let me tell you about Linda. I had worked with Linda and her husband as their financial planner for almost 10 years. I helped Bill take early retirement. Linda wanted to work a couple more years at an executive job she loved. But she got a phone call one Monday morning at work to get to the hospital immediately. When she arrived there, Bill was already dead. He died suddenly on the tennis court playing doubles with his buddies. When I visited Linda after the funeral, she had put little yellow Post-it Notes all over her house. She asked, “Am I going crazy? I just feel numb. I forget stuff if I’m in the kitchen and walk to my bedroom. I have to write it down immediately, so I’ll remember.” “No, Linda, you’re not going nuts. You’re just in the early phases of deep grief,” I replied. Indeed, many of us widows have referred to this as “widow’s brain.”

Know that a widow’s grief experiences and her cognitive disconnect are perfectly normal. Also understand that what’s normal for one widow is not the same for another. Even I, a widow, never tell another woman, “Oh, I know exactly how you feel.” Because I don’t.

So, what does a widow really need from you? Well, that partly depends on where’s she’s at on her widow’s journey. Let’s take a look at the stages of widowhood.

## Three Stages of Widowhood



I’ve observed three basic stages that a widow goes through during her transition from widow to independent woman.

1. Grief stage
2. Growth stage
3. Grace or transformation stage

I’m in my 11th year as a widow. It was in the fifth year on my journey, when I was writing in my journal one morning, that I wrote**,** “Hey, I’m much more than a widow; I am an independent woman.” It took me several years to get there. It was not an overnight phenomenon.

First, there’s the initial **grief stage**, the numb time when she understands her husband is gone forever. That’s when there should be a focus on taking care of herself, including her physical health. This is a very precarious time, and widows often get sick. This is when she needs critical financial triage, with supportive listening to help stabilize her situation. Listen to her and encourage her to share memories. Assure her it’s OK to be in a decision-free zone, without rushing to make big, irrevocable financial decisions, and only doing what’s absolutely necessary. It can be a vulnerable time because her cognitive thinking may be impaired. It’s not appropriate to make big permanent decisions, such as moving out of her house right away. There will be some immediate financial matters you can help with, such as getting a good overview of her cash flow situation, being sure bills continue to be paid, filing for death benefits, and getting a broad-brush view of her financial assets, deciding when to claim social security benefits, and more. To use a yoga term, the widow’s focus is on *breathing*.By the way, I suggest that widows consider yoga. The first class I took was the same day I picked up my husband’s ashes from the mortuary.

Later, she enters a **growth stage** when she’ll be ready for discussions about investments and more general financial planning. This is the “taking care of business” phase. It happens after her thinking is clearer. As her advisor, you’ll help her complete most of the financial steps for new widows, which you’ll find in the guidebook or free e-booklet on my website. You’ll do basic estate planning updates, look at her investment portfolio for possible repositioning, and pay attention to her tax situation. Pre- and postretirement decisions will come into play, plus housing decisions—whether to stay or go. It’s a time of *balance*, to use another yoga term.

So, how long does it take to go from the grief stage to the growth stage? It all depends. No one answer fits all. And it might be influenced by how the spouse died. For example, if it was a sudden and unexpected death, like Bill on the tennis court, that’s much different than another client’s death that same year. It was a husband and wife in their late 80s. The husband had been living “on borrowed time” with dementia, according to his wife. She started her grieving even before her husband died. Each widow’s journey is different.

It’s not a straight linear path from grief to growth either. There are days of two steps forward and one step backward, or even one forward and three backward. That middle stage is a comfortable place for most widows, and they may be content to remain there. Unfortunately, some widows who get hung up in that first grief stage never make it out to the second stage. They are ones referred to as “staying stuck.” And if they are stuck in grief, are quite senior, and were “joined at the hip” with their spouse, they may pass within a couple of years after the death of that partner. You’ve heard stories about husbands and wives who die within months, sometimes even days or even hours, of each other. Such a close relationship. That surviving spouse really may die of a broken heart. Did you know there’s research on the broken heart syndrome? It really exists. The medical term is *cardiomyopathy*.

Many widows ultimately go on to the third stage of widowhood—**grace**, or, as some prefer to call it, **transformation.** It can be a beautiful time when her new life evolves with reinvention, renewal, and repurposing. There can be new people, new experiences, and new opportunities. This is a time of “taking care of more.” That’s when she will emerge, evolving from seeing herself primarily as a widow to becoming an independent woman. These women often enjoy focusing on advanced planning concepts, such as family issues or legacy and charitable planning related to family and others they love. A family business may be involved. That’s all part of the “Redesign Your Life” work. It’s thrilling to observe as you help shepherd your widowed client along this path after her spouse’s death.

## Advice for New Widows

Now, let’s quickly go through some advice I share with new widows to help them avoid pitfalls. These may also be good talking points for you as you work with widowed clients.

* **Don’t rush.** During the initial reality shock period, only critical financial triage actions are necessary. She shouldn’t buy financial products she doesn’t understand or need. To be prepared for this, she might practice saying something like “That’s an interesting idea, but it’s way too early in the process for me to decide now. My advisor and I are just starting to sort things out and decide what’s best for me in the long term. But I appreciate your suggestions.” She might stand in front of a mirror to rehearse saying this to “helpful” friends, relatives, and financial salespersons.
* **Beware of financial wolves.** Unfortunately, sometimes vulnerable widows are taken advantage of by shysters who prey on them. Advise your clients to shun folks who want to enrich themselves at the widow’s expense. Remind her that if the deal she’s pitched looks too good to be true, it probably is. Widows have been pushed into outrageous and highly unethical Ponzi schemes, investment scams, and worse. My Aunt Eileen was sold Iraqi dinar—that’s the currency of Iraq. He said this “investment” would soon double in value, and it was much better than letting her money languish in bank CDs. He was the nice young nephew of a friend from church!
* **Make house decisions carefully.** After her husband’s death, a widow may find that her home feels incredibly empty. When she walks into the living room and no longer sees Fred sitting in his favorite chair, that can trigger tears. Some women want to escape the memories. Perhaps an adult son or daughter invites mom move in with him or her. But, this might not be the right decision if it’s made hastily. While she may decide later to relocate from a large home to a more easily maintained place, it’s generally better to make this choice over time.

Some women want to use life insurance benefits to pay off an existing mortgage immediately. Rather, she should consider her liquidity needs before transferring a lot of money to pay down the mortgage, especially if she might move in the near future. She doesn’t want to be house rich but cash poor.

There will come a time when she wants to make “our house” into “my house.” Help her plan a spending budget so she doesn’t go crazy over-remodeling. For example, one of my widowed clients wanted to spend more on remodeling than the house was worth. My own first changes to my house were in the bedroom because that was such an intimate space.

* **Get real with her money.** Give her an objective review. She needs to look at her sources of income. What are the bills and money outflow? Create a money flow plan and a net worth statement to honestly evaluate her financial position. Later, when she’s past her reality shock/fog state with financial triage assistance, she can look at her investments. She’s at a different place now than before when her husband was alive.

I’ll share Phyllis’s story. When she came to me after her husband’s death, she didn’t have a clue about their total net worth. I did subtotals and got to a half million. “Yes, that’s about right,” she said. “No, Phyllis, there’s much more,” I said. She was worth a cool $2 million. When she realized this, she got mad. “All these years, he said we didn’t have enough money. We couldn’t travel, couldn’t help our son build his new house, couldn’t buy that new dining room set and more.” Phyllis felt they had missed out on so much with his unnecessary frugality. She got over it though, and she started traveling on her own.

Jane came to me about six months after her husband’s death. She said she didn’t understand all his investments but had a gut feeling that they were too “aggressive.” She was right. The portfolio was 90 percent risky stocks that didn’t fit her situation after his death. She agreed to reposition them into a more safe and secure plan, including steady income. But then on the day when it was time to sell the old stocks, she said, “Stop! I can’t do this. It’s just like I’m slapping Ralph in the face, saying I’m just going to willy-nilly sell all his choices.” It was almost like he was controlling her from the grave. She felt disloyal about shifting assets from what her husband selected years or even decades ago. We had to revisit the process, and then she agreed to move forward—right before the market crashed. She was very grateful, saying, “I’ll be with you forever.” You can help widows understand why their investments as a couple were good back then but not now. A widow may want more safety and security today. You can assist her to define goals and select appropriate investment vehicles.

* **Don’t be a purse.** Family members, including adult children from blended families, may tug at Mom’s heartstrings, asking for an inheritance early. If it’s hard for the widow to say no, encourage her to simply tell folks that her professional advisor has suggested that it’s too early to talk about how her husband’s money will be used. Or there’s the son who already went bankrupt, wanting money to open a car wash franchise without a business plan. In addition to relatives, others may try to tap into a widow’s wealth, especially if she decides to enter the dating world again in the future. Sometimes those fellows are also looking for a purse. She should be wary of the intentions of possible suitors and keep her money matters to herself until that relationship is more long term. One 90-year-old client, Grace Mirth, told me, “Don’t be a purse or a nurse or, God forbid, a mother!” Guess what? She was right. When I started dating, I met all three types of guys. But then I met a wonderful man who had been widowed longer than me and didn’t want me to be his purse, nurse, or mother. He’s a retired nuclear engineer and a wonderful partner. We were blessed to find each other eight years ago. I also must tell you that Charlie is younger than me. So, does that make me a cougar? I’m so blessed. I get to love two guys—both Charlie and my late husband—but obviously in very different ways.
* **The ABCs of widowhood:** **A**sk questions; **B**uyer beware; and use part of her money to **C**are for herself. That may include exercise, joining friends for a healthy meal, music, art, flowers, good touch (massages and hair done). **C** also stands for chocolate.

## Connect with Your Widowed Clients and Prospects

* **Listen deeply to her story and talk less.** Ask questions. A good starting point with a new widow is “How has today been for you?” Then hear what she tells you and focus on what she’s saying rather than thinking about the next thing you’ll talk about. Or, “I can’t begin to understand your personal grief right now, but please know I’m here to help ease the pain if I can.” Say her husband’s name and encourage her to share memories. We widows don’t want the world to forget our husbands, whom we’ll love forever. It’s OK if she cries because these will be healing tears. Pay attention to the body language and speech she’s using. You may want to bring a female assistant to the meeting if you’re a male advisor. Watch where her attention goes. If it’s toward the female, then continue to include this person in your meetings, at least for a while.
* **Help new widows feel secure and safe.** These women are not interested in beating the market. Their main question is “Am I going to be OK financially?” High on their priority list is understanding their current financial position and how to maintain a good lifestyle. Some multimillionaire widows will come to your office afraid they may be bag ladies. Keep your explanations clear and simple.
* **Encourage widows to take their time with decisions that don’t require immediate attention.** She doesn’t need to rebalance her portfolio instantly. If she talks about paying off her home mortgage with life insurance proceeds right away, suggest that she temporarily park this money in a secure, interest-earning account until she has time to think through her options for this money, which she may need for other purposes.
* **Avoid cliches.** These can be turnoffs. Avoid things that start with “At least you had 19 good years together,” “At least you have your children,” or “At least you can be glad he’s not suffering now.”
* **Be her new “thinking partner”** as she trusts that you hear her and “get” where she’s at emotionally. A widow’s “brain freeze” is very real in the early phases of her grief. She will hear your words but not necessarily understand or remember what you say.That’s the widow’s brain. Provide a written one-page summary of your meetings, noting action items for you and her. This is especially important during a widow’s stressful early grief period when she’s often highly forgetful. It’s good if she writes this herself.
* **Show compassion and care.** In addition to your empathetic support, encourage her to participate in grief support services as appropriate. Many women enjoy, and find hope, reading books that include other widows’ stories. Free online grief recovery and support sites including *g*[*riefshare.org*](http://GriefShare.org) may also be helpful. An online chat group is at [*widowedvillage.org*](http://www.widowedvillage.org). It’s run by widowed people for widowed people. There’s also hospice and personal counseling. You can assist with activities that may overwhelm her. I’ve accompanied new widows to the first meeting with their estate settlement attorney, for example. Or share recommendations from other widows for handyman-type work—like a trusted onsite computer technician.

Use a *Now, Soon, Later*one-page summary of what to do that you’ve talked about in a meeting. For example, here’s what I did with Linda after Bill’s death. A **Now** task was to spend time with family who were in town for the funeral service. Also, locate Bill’s life insurance policy. **Soon** tasks included listing all her regular income and expenses and canceling a trip to Germany. **Later** tasks would be rebalancing the investment portfolio and deciding what to do with Bill’s car.

## Mistakes to Avoid

**Communication:** During her grief, don’t be insensitive with your language. We really don’t know how to talk well about death in our culture. For many, it’s a taboo topic. Avoid these phrases:

* “I’m so sorry for your loss.” This phrase is a platitude. Rather, say something like “This must be an extremely difficult time for you now.” Keep the focus on her rather than on your feelings.
* “I know just how you feel. My brother-in-law died two months ago.” I don’t ever say this to a widow because each woman’s journey is unique.
* “God needed another angel in heaven.” Wrong. I needed Tom by my side, not flying around somewhere up there.
* “Call me if you need anything.” Rather, identify a specific way you can help. “I notice that you have a lot of unopened mail on your kitchen table. Would you like my assistant to help you go through this together in a couple of days?”

Rather, say this:

* “How have these past weeks been for you?”
* “How are you sleeping? Eating?”
* “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now. Please know I’m sending good thoughts your way.”

Put the focus on her, not you.

* Not “I was shocked to hear about Bill’s death.”
* Instead, talk about Bill. “I will always remember his big smile and his great laugh. Every time we got together, he had a joke to share.”
* If you didn’t know her husband: “Unfortunately, I didn’t know John. How would you want others to remember him?”

You can find more helpful ideas in another free e-booklet on my website—*Impactful Empathy: What to Say and How to Say It to Your Grieving Widowed Client*.

Drop the financial jargon and put away your fancy charts and quarterly AUM reports. A new widow isn’t interested in those. Your advice and answers to her questions will be more helpful than just the numbers, which can be overwhelming.

Don’t aim for highly efficient meetingslike you do with other clients. Your goal isn’t to hurry up the process. Rather, give a widow breathing space as you engage her, listen, and help her to make financial decisions. More frequent and shorter meetings are better than three-hour marathon sessions with 10-year financial projections.

## Attract, Connect, and Engage Widowed Clients

Here’s another free e-booklet you can download from my website. [visual] Now I’m going to simply summarize a few of the ideas from this resource.

If you work with widows already or if you want to assist more of these women, let folks know you specialize in helping women who are surviving spouses. Make this part of your branding. Maybe add a tagline like “trusted guidance for widows” or “empowering widows to feel financially secure.”

Craft and share your heart story about why you work with widows. Our brains are wired to understand and remember stories. Stories are easier for folks to remember than facts or figures alone. Stories can support your ideas, especially when you weave in the facts and figures. Perhaps tell a story about a widowed client (without specific names) you’ve assisted. For example, a story like Linda’s, whose husband died suddenly, or Jane’s, whose investment dollars were saved. Women will understand and remember your stories even when they forget other things you might tell them.

Also show them a picture of what you do—to make your process more transparent. Something like this, perhaps, emphasizing the progress they’ll make.



Offer workshops for women. Here’s an event we did in Minnesota. [visual] We worked with their local TV station and got great coverage on TV and in the newspaper as a community service activity—not an advertisement for the firm! Over 100 women attended this educational event. It was not a sales event. But guess what? Afterward, several women scheduled appointments to learn more about the sponsoring firm!

Speak where women naturally gather and be hosted by that group—women’s clubs, hospice, library, lifelong learning center, a congregation or other spiritual center, community college, senior center, nonprofit, and more. It’s a great way to share enlightening information.

Your seminars will be for widows and those who think they may be widowed in the future. They may also be for women with a widowed relative or friend. That includes almost every woman. Your workshops can be for couples, too, before there’s only a surviving spouse left. These couples want to be proactive before their time comes. What are the passwords and pins on our accounts? What’s in the safety deposit box and whose names are there for access? Where are accounts and who are our advisors? Are beneficiaries updated?

Look for opportunities to get published with articles you write about widows. What about your blog or newsletter? You don’t necessarily have to aim for the *Wall Street Journal*. Just start with your local community’s paper and go from there.

Keep your article’s focus on educational information. Something like “Five Mistakes Every Widow Should Avoid”might be good. Many community newspapers are delighted to publish these types of stories. Use a ghostwriter to help you if that will help. Start with one of my articles and change it up to be your own voice. Then bingo! You’ve got a piece to publish.

Host a social gathering of women together on a Sunday afternoon or an evening that works for your community with an inspiring host—you! A special warmth and compassionate atmosphere is created when women come together for an event like this. Women like to learn things collaboratively and share good information informally. They enjoy getting together and talking. Make it interactive, such as using the “values inventory” from the guidebook. It’s a great way to start discussions.

Maybe have a tasting party. They’re fun. We did events near Valentine’s Day, when widows came together—for gals who didn’t have hubbies to hug on February 14. We enjoyed chocolate desserts and favorite beverages. They invited their girlfriends too. One widow lingered after an event asking to talk with me long after others had left. She wasn’t widowed yet but said she felt that way. Her husband had Alzheimer’s and wasn’t expected to live long. Was her staying longer a surprise? Nope. She felt safe and secure with this group.

Another gathering topic for widows was “Fashion, Food, Fun, and Finances—Don’t Tie Your Finances in Knots.” It came with a lesson on scarf tying. A popular event for couples was “Love Is Eternal, but Life Isn’t.” We talked about what to do *before* one member of the couple passed.

Consider becoming an ambassador or a sponsor for a local chapter of the national nonprofit Modern Widows Club. They have about 20 chapters across the country, with more new chapters beginning soon. You can learn more at their website at *m*[*odernwidowsclub.com*](http://www.ModernWidowsClub.com). Another option is regional groups of Soaring Spirits International at [*soaringspirits.org*](http://www.soaringspirits.org). These offer wonderful opportunities to meet with widows.

Professionals have told me they find my guidebook helpful to use with new widows. One of the most often used sections of the book includes financial steps for new widows. It’s in checklist format, so it’s easy for a widow and her advisor to keep track of what she’s done and what needs to be taken care of. This was written as a gift book to be given to widows. You can also download a free copy of this checklist from my website.

You could give this guidebook to a recently widowed prospective client, saying, “When the time is right, you may find this book helpful. It was written by a certified financial planner who is also a widow. I know the author, Kathleen. Start by looking at the beautiful artwork and reading some of the inspirational quotes. There’s also a helpful list of steps for recent widows. Later, I’d like to talk more about this guidebook with you, if you’re interested. There are some helpful activities we could do together.” That keeps the widow in control, to go forward when she’s ready.

## Research

Up until a couple of years ago, I could count the number of scholarly, evidence-based research there was about widows and money on just one hand. There were lots of anecdotal stories, but not sound research.

But our team is changing that. Our team includes PhDs from three universities, directors from the two largest nonprofits serving widows, and the head of a training institute.

Our first study focused on widows and money and was published in the January 2016 issue of the *Journal of Financial Service Professionals*. It was called “Widows’ Voices: The Value of Financial Planning.” The second study appeared in the May 2017 issue of that journal and was called “Helping Repartnered Widows Navigate Romance and Finance: The Role of Financial Advice.” Over 4,000 widowed persons participated in that study. The third manuscript was published in the December 2017 issue of the *Journal of Financial Planning*. It was titled “Enhancing Financial Confidence Among Widows: The Role of Financial Professionals.”

A major finding of our second and third reports was that widows who repartnered after their spouse’s death and then worked with a financial professional were much more satisfied with how they’d handled finances than widows who didn’t work with a professional. Especially helpful were those advisors who dealt with the personal side of financial planning, not just the technical side.

## My Lemons to Lemonade Story

When my husband died, I hated it. But you’ve all heard the cliché: “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” That’s what happened with me.

I’m grateful. This work of assisting widows and their advisors became my passion, my purpose after my husband’s death. It was a way for me to make something positive from his passing and help my own healing.

After more than a decade as a widow, my life almost totally transformed. Yes, I still like riding a bicycle, but check out my sharp new raspberry metallic “comfort” bike! [visual] With aqua wheels even! I love it, and I love my new life. Like other widows, I’ve reinvented, refocused, and renewed my life. It is full of new purposes and possibilities. I love it!

I set up the Moving Forward on Your Own Foundation, with money from my speaking and writing activities, to make grants to organizations that benefit widows and their children. We’ve given more than 40 grants to date. Here’s a picture of me with Miriam Neff. [visual] Our first grant was for Widow Connection. That’s when I was still a flaming redhead three years ago. (Since then I decided to go gray, and super short—my inspiration was Judi Dench, who is also a widow!) We gave money to buy treadle sewing machines for widows in Africa so they could start little businesses to make things to help support their families. I really resonated with the treadle Singer sewing machines because that’s how I learned to sew—on my great grandmother’s treadle machine.

Yes, your widowed client has loved. She has lost. But she can move forward on her own. With your help, she isn’t alone.

## Do One Thing

I hope you’ve picked up at least one idea in this session, which you can use soon when you go back home. Otherwise we’ve just spent an hour together sharing stories with a few laughs and maybe even a tear. If you don’t do something when you return to your office, nothing will change in your practice. Maybe you’ll:

* Stop using clichés
* Give her the widows’ guidebook
* Ask your widowed clients open-ended questions; then listen
* Focus on her feelings and not yours
* Share your heart story and why you help widows
* Write an article for your blog, newsletter, or local newspaper
* Send a handwritten card, sharing a memory of her husband
* Reach out in your social media to tell folks you work with widows
* Develop your tagline and use this

Identify one activity to do after returning to your office that will enhance your activities with widowed clients and/or prospects.

In most of these sessions that I lead, advisors ask, “How can I learn more?” So, here’s a short 53-second video with an overview of a Special Widows Interest track. If you want to delve deeper, it might be a good option for you. [visual]

As you help widows move into a new life after the death of their spouse, you’ll be richly rewarded. These women will greatly appreciate your caring and compassionate client-centric relationship. Plus, your widowed clients will be loyal and great referral sources as your reputation spreads as being a compassionate and trusted advisor who really does what’s best for widows. These women are wonderful to work with. As attributed to Benjamin Franklin, “Do well by doing good.”

Blessings in your work with widows. I greatly appreciate all you do for my “widowed sisters.”