

How I Coped with Loss While Living Overseas

By Genevieve Northup

My husband was wading in our villa's infinity pool, and I was sunning on a lounge chair in the rainforest of Bali, Indonesia when my cellphone chirped. It was a message from my brother asking me to call my mom. He knew I was 10,000 miles from home – 5,000 miles from my house in Germany – and I knew something was wrong.

My heart pounded as I made a phone call that would change my life. On the other end of the phone, my mom's voice cracked as she told me my dad had died.

To lose a loved one, especially when you are so far away, is one of the hardest things you may ever experience. Everyone copes differently, and I can't claim to be an expert. But I can share how I survived in the hopes that it will provide some comfort if you face loss while living overseas ...

I accepted the range of emotions.

I couldn't eat that first night. I cried hysterically and called my brother and close friends. In the next room, my husband arranged a flight to Frankfurt. The following morning, I was exhausted, numb and starving. After a big breakfast, we went to the airport. Already a white-knuckle flier and anxiety sufferer, my system was on overdrive with the added shock of the previous 24 hours. I fell asleep shortly after takeoff but woke up a few hours later in the throes of the worst panic attack of my life.

I remembered to breathe.

"Belly breathing" is a cornerstone of coping techniques for anxiety, so I started taking long, deep breaths during my panic attack. My mind calmed, and my heart slowed down as I focused on breathing in through my nose and out through my mouth.

I sought professional support.

Before departing Bali, I called the behavioral health department at the local Military Treatment Facility (MTF) to get an appointment with a psychiatrist. I went there straight from the Frankfurt airport. The psychiatrist asked me about my emotional and physical well-being: appetite, sleep, anxiety, depression. He gave me the names and numbers of resources for support during the grieving process. He also suggested I read "How to Survive the Loss of a Love," a book that addressed the myriad of emotions in the wake of break-ups, divorce, abandonment and death.

Most importantly, he told me I had to take care of myself: eat, sleep, exercise and do what felt right and only what I thought I could do. That morning, I wasn't sure I was ready for the 11-hour flight home. With one week before the memorial service, I had time to prepare and decide. I scheduled a follow-up with the psychiatrist and reached out to my English-speaking counselor on the German economy for an appointment.

More help: Aside from MTF behavioral health staff and counselors on the economy, non-medical counseling is available

through Army Community Service/Airman & Family Readiness Center Military & Family Life Counseling (MFLC) programs, chaplain's offices and Survivor Outreach Services. MilitaryOneSource also provides phone and online counseling sessions.

I let people in.

My husband, co-workers and friends were there to support me. I arrived home to supportive emails and shoulders to cry on. When my husband returned to work, I did not want to be alone. I found the most helpful activity to be walks with my closest friends. The exercise and fresh air were good for me, my dog was happy, and I didn't feel obligated to talk.

I took time for myself.

Having a constant stream of friends and family was a welcome distraction, but I needed time to decompress. I napped and read, but I felt most like myself when I was productive. I started laundry, prepared a grocery list, went for short runs and returned to work after the weekend.

I listened to my body.

I felt the most "normal" while at work. I eased back into my routine by going in for half days and focusing on only the most pressing deadlines.

More help: What is best for you might be something else – and that's OK. Just make sure to eat, sleep and keep up with personal hygiene. Seek help if you are unable to accomplish these functions.

I made the journey home, despite fear.

I'd been back in Germany four days and worked two when I decided to go home. I was afraid to get on a plane, scared of having another awful panic attack, and terrified of the emotional pain that awaited.

The flight to Texas was not so bad, and the time with my mom, brother and other family members helped to reassure me that I would get through this. I am thankful I was there to speak at my father's memorial. I can't begin to imagine how much I would have regretted not being there.

I didn't make major decisions right away.

I wanted to stay in my mom's comforting arms. I wanted to hide under the covers – hide from responsibility and pain – like a kid who doesn't want to go to school. I got on the plane back to Germany anyway. Staying in Texas wouldn't bring my dad back and would only alleviate a little of the pain. I recognized that to leave behind everything in Germany was too big a decision to make while distraught. Instead, I promised to remain aware of my feelings about moving back as the weeks and months passed, at which point I could make a decision.

I found ways to grieve.

My dad had a small role in my daily life in Germany, and reminders of him did not surround me. This proved to be both a blessing and a curse because his death didn't seem real.

I made time to grieve to avoid living in denial. I thought about my dad while I ran. I wrote letters to tell him all the things I wished I had said before he died. I wrote about my experiences after his death – speaking at his memorial, visiting his home and spreading his ashes. My husband and I toasted snifters of Dad's favorite whisky to remember him on his birthday.

More help: Whether you do it alone, with a counselor, or through a support group, make sure to grieve, so you can begin to heal. Seek professional assistance if you experience symptoms of "complicated grief," such as long-term denial or anger, depression, intrusive thoughts or substance abuse.

I focused on living.

Every day for six months, I was sad when I woke up. I got out of bed anyway. I went to work, ran errands, spent time with friends, traveled, enjoyed my hobbies ... and grieved. Eventually, the loss hurt a little less.

I still cry sometimes, and I still miss my dad every day. But I focus on the future because that is what I have. ■