

"*STUNNED* brings purpose and direction to the painful grief process from someone who's been there: It meets you right where you are."

—DARRELL AND STEVIE WALTRIP,
founders of Motor Racing Outreach



STUNNED BY GRIEF

REMAPPING YOUR LIFE

WHEN LOSS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Judy Brizendine



“Just as graduation is called a commencement and not a termination, one’s life is about the never-ending beginnings we all experience through loss and change. The courageous recreate themselves and their lives and enter love’s service because of their wounds. Read and learn from Judy’s experience.”

—Bernie Siegel, MD,
author of *365 Prescriptions for the Soul*
and *Prescriptions for Living*

“From loss to renewal, *STUNNED by Grief* provides clear, inspirational steps to manage the death of a loved one. There isn’t a single solution, or prescription; rather, a series of personal thoughts and actions derived from Brizendine’s own experience and those of others. Everyone, from military spouse to parents and friends, will find calm, steady guidance that resonates. Definitely a book worth reading, as we all need inspiration to overcome our personal loss, and reminders of the joy of life and the strength of the human spirit.”

—Scott Rutter (LTC, U.S. Army, Ret.),
national spokesman, Tragedy Assistance
Program for Survivors (TAPS)

“*STUNNED by Grief* brings purpose and direction to the painful grief process from someone who’s been there. Judy shares ‘real life’ as she reveals how God can give you strength and courage to overcome tragedy. *STUNNED* will meet you right where you are. It’s a book about grief unlike any other.”

—Darrell and Stevie Waltrip,
founders of Motor Racing Outreach
FOX Sports commentator and
former NASCAR Winston Cup champion

“This book is a true gem and a must read for anyone who has experienced the grief of a close personal loss. The author opens her heart, mind, and, most importantly, her soul to examine the devastation of her husband’s death and her ultimate triumph through her faith in God. This book is a true inspiration. She is painfully honest, open, and extremely uplifting in her writing.”

—Gary L. Malone, MD,
board certified psychiatrist and psychoanalyst
author of *Five Keys for Understanding Men: A Woman’s Guide*

“Ready or not—the experience of the death of a loved one is stunning. Like being left blindfolded in a deep dark jungle, finding one’s way to a safe and familiar territory will overwhelm you with hopelessness. You might ask, ‘If only someone who has been here could walk me through this . . .?’ Well, your map and guide are within your grasp.

“More than just answers, Judy Brizendine will ‘red dot’ your heart’s location and give you a clear sense of direction and renewed destiny. My wife Jeannie and I serve as pastors to Judy. She is a joy to work closely and passionately with, and we love doing ‘life’ with her and Jon. We both trust Judy, and the God she has come to know in a deeper way through her pain. Pain that can now become your gain. You will laugh, live, and yes, love again!”

—Phil Munsey,
founding pastor, Life Church
author of *Legacy Now: Why Everything about You Matters*

“Out of her tears and personal grief, Judy Brizendine has created a warm and sensitive message that is filled with great wisdom, practical help—and a pathway of hope for the future. Make this book a gift to every person you know who is in the midst of grief.”

—Paul A. Eshleman,
vice president, Campus Crusade for Christ, International

“Judy has so eloquently portrayed the process of grieving and of subsequent healing. Reading her excellent book has released a river of Hope that springs eternal. I am amazed at the insights and clarity that she projects. Many will be blessed who read it.”

—Moses and Betty Vegh,
Ambassadors of Hope to the Nations

“For anyone who has ever walked through the dark days of grief—or knows someone who is there right now—*STUNNED by Grief* is a must. You’ll find hope, help, and honesty between these pages. Written by one who has been there, *STUNNED* will encourage and equip those caught in the throes of loss.”

—J.P. Jones,
senior pastor, Crossline Community Church

—Donna Jones,
speaker and author

Also available from this author

***STUNNED** by Grief Journal*

STUNNED BY GRIEF

REMAPPING YOUR LIFE
WHEN LOSS CHANGES EVERYTHING

Judy Brizendine



BennettKnepp
PUBLISHING

Lake Forest, CA

STUNNED by Grief: Remapping Your Life When Loss Changes Everything

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Published by BennettKnepp Publishing

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Printed in the United States of America

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Extension of Copyright Page appears on page 257

DISCLAIMER: Please read page 259.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data (Prepared by The Donohue Group, Inc.)

Brizendine, Judy.

Stunned by grief : remapping your life when loss changes everything / Judy Brizendine.

p. : ill. ; cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN: 978-0-9831688-1-2

1. Grief--Religious aspects. 2. Grief--Psychological aspects. 3. Bereavement--Religious aspects. 4. Bereavement--Psychological aspects. 3. Loss (Psychology) 4. Adjustment (Psychology) 5. Spiritual healing. I. Title.

BV4905.3 .B75 2011

248.8/6/6

2010917535

Credits: Cover and interior design by DesignForBooks.com. Cover photos: Author photo, Jon Kreider © 2011; clouds, iStockphoto © dusipuffi; silhouette image, open source art by Lu Feng. Editor: Susan Malone, Malone Editorial Services.

DEDICATION

. . . first and foremost, I dedicate this book to God.

Without His love, inspiration, presence, and hope, I would not be telling my story.

. . . to each person who shared your journey with us by participating in the grief-support workshops Jon and I facilitated.

I extend my deepest thanks. We received far more from each of you than can possibly be imagined—and more than we could ever give back. Priceless insights came directly from you, and your words and experiences interwoven throughout this book will inform, comfort, encourage, strengthen, and give hope to others facing the pain of grief.

. . . to my dear husband and best friend, Jon Kreider, my partner in every area of life, including our mutual desire to convey God's love to grieving people.

Your passion about helping others face grief inspired me to give more of myself, and convinced me that I have a meaningful story to share. Only a strong, secure man could handle reading entries from his wife's journal about her late husband, even if a worthwhile purpose is involved. Seeing the words in print for everyone else to read is even more difficult. However, you firmly agreed that we can help people in a more powerful way by being transparent about grief, and your commitment took precedence over any personal discomfort.

I am very happy God's plan for my future included such a caring, generous, and wonderful man. And I'm grateful that we've been given a second chance for love after losing both of our spouses to death.

. . . to the precious life and memory of my late husband, John Brizendine.

Your death began my struggle with grief, but the sorrow evolved into a slowly unfolding story of hope. This book is a way of honoring your memory and bringing something good out of the most painful period of my life. If the truth about my experience helps anyone, then telling it is worthwhile. That's what the circle of life is all about, isn't it—each of us loving and helping one another.

Celebrating the lives of:

John A. Brizendine III (Maj., USMC, Ret.), my husband

William L. Luttrell, my dad

Verlene Kreider, Jon's mom

Donna Kreider, Jon's wife

CONTENTS

Preface xi

Acknowledgments xv

Part One—Unpacking Grief *What Is Happening to Me?*

Introduction 3

- 1** What Does Grief Look Like—and How Does It Progress? 9
- 2** How Do I Respond to Grief? 15
- 3** How Do Others Respond to Me? 29
- 4** The Isolation of Grief—a Solitary Journey 37
- 5** Insensitivity—or Lack of Understanding? 49
- 6** Why Am I Afraid?—and How Do I Conquer My Fear? 55
- 7** Pivotal Question: Do I Really Want to Get Well? 65
- 8** Grief Is Active: The Pain (and Reward) of Confrontation 73
- 9** Here I Am, but Where Do I Turn for Help and What Do I Do? 81

- 10 “Jeeping” over Unknown Terrain 93
- 11 Anger, Guilt, Depression, and “Why?” Questions 101
- 12 Emotions: a Misleading and Unreliable Gauge 115
- 13 Thoughts Are Powerful 121

Part Two—Remapping My Life *Where Do I Go from Here?*

- 14 Acknowledging Your Loss Is Crucial to Healing 137
- 15 Release: Endings and Beginnings 143
- 16 “Remapping” Your Life 151
- 17 Remapping 101: Will You Take the Risk? 161
- 18 Laughter—Unbelievable “Medicine” 175
- 19 Our Timing—or God’s? 187
- 20 Learning to Embrace Solitude 195
- 21 Metamorphosis—from Pain to New Beginnings 201

Part Three—Interactive Exercises *Remapping Tools*

- Interactive Exercises: The Road to Healing 211
- Questions for Journaling 215

Part Four—Hope
You Still Have a Future

Hope for You 219

Signs of a New Beginning 227

Things I've Learned about Grief 229

The Ripple Effect 231

Your Destiny 233

Hope from God's Word 235

Psalm 23 243

Epilogue 245

Endnotes 249

Extension of Copyright Page 257

Disclaimer Page 259

Selected Bibliography and Recommended Reading 261

Sources on Laughter, Humor Therapy, and Health 265

Index 269

PREFACE

Do what you can with what you have, right where you are.

—THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Why write a book about grief? Because, frankly, when the harsh reality of my husband's death became real, I had absolutely *no idea* what to do. I was painfully unprepared to face grief and the effects of loss. And the thought of others (just like me) struggling to gain control over something they can't grasp or explain, concerns me deeply.

Grief is not what we expect, and its reality is nothing we can imagine.

Grievers urgently need to know what is happening. But pain alters one's ability to focus. I understand. Steady concentration was a battle for me, and a regular complaint among grief-group members. Despite the difficulty, you need information. Because of my challenging experience, I want to ease the way for other hurting people to navigate through the fear, confusion, and uncertainty of their grief journeys without bogging down in too many details—or groping to find answers.

This book is different. Think of it as a no-nonsense look at the essentials. When you read this material, you will readily understand

the basics—what you really need to know at first about grief. You will find out about critical obstacles and challenges—*flashpoints*—to expect during your grief. And you'll learn about what is happening and what to do.

Grief is not what we expect, and its reality is nothing we can imagine.

Rather than a comprehensive look at the subject by a therapist or medical professional, this book is a fellow traveler's down-to-earth approach to grief. It breaks down the material into bite-sized pieces that are easy to follow for anyone going through the distress of grief. You do not have to read the book straight through; in fact, if you quickly need help with a certain topic, turn to any chapter or section and read it separately.

I am an ongoing survivor of grief and this book is the story of my journey—that of a person who faced devastating loss firsthand and slowly worked through it. It's a book about insight. And change. The details are intimate. By revealing an inside look at grief, my aim is to give a realistic perspective. I want you to know what to expect.

Also, I have connected with others who are experiencing the effects of pain and loss by facilitating grief-support groups. During these workshops, certain key issues repeatedly surfaced—either because they were especially hard to handle (complex, explosive, or unpredictable), or because they were essential in a participant's journey toward healing. This book accentuates these crucial topics.

Grief, hope, determination, and faith are the focus of this easy-to-read guide meant to inform, inspire, encourage, and support all those facing the loss of someone vitally important. While my perspective is that of a person who lost her husband unexpectedly, this book presents relevant information to anyone facing profound loss and trying to understand it.

My goal throughout the book is to come alongside you—wherever you are—and help you unscramble the turmoil of grief. My desire is to comfort you as you face your own grief questions and uncertainties. I will tell you about things I wish I had known. I want to encourage you with hope, and convince you that you *do* still have a future—and that your future can be positive and meaningful.

Grief is a demanding, confusing detour in life's journey, but it is not the final destination. Your road does not end here.

I wish you Godspeed as you travel toward healing.

You are not alone. God loves you more than you can possibly imagine. And He's looking for you, even if you're not yet trying to find Him.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Judy Brizendine". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and larger than the others.

Judy Brizendine

P.S. At the end of each chapter is a “Thought to Write About.” These statements and questions provide an opportunity for you to write your thoughts and feelings about the subject covered in the chapter.

Just start writing . . . about what is tearing at your heart, what you can't stop thinking about, what keeps you awake at night, makes you angry, frightens you, confuses you, what you're grateful for, or whatever comes into your mind.

Writing—or journaling—helps release everything bottled up tightly inside. Sometimes talking about personal feelings is difficult, so writing helps you process these painful emotions and advances your healing.

Pick up a journal or notebook and start writing.

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

The best way out is always through.

—ROBERT FROST

PART
ONE

UNPACKING GRIEF

What Is Happening to Me?

INTRODUCTION

*Life changes fast . . . Life changes in the instant.
The ordinary instant.*

—JOAN DIDION

(FROM *The Year of Magical Thinking*)

You're probably wondering what happened to bring me to this place, so I'll briefly share my story with you. Little did I know my life was about to change—irreversibly and *forever*. While that statement may sound dramatic, if you are reading this book, in all likelihood either you or someone you love has experienced grief. Tragedy generally strikes unexpectedly, while we are just living our everyday lives.

On a beautiful spring morning in April 1998, everything was terrific. I was content. My marriage was happier than it had ever been, and I was working in a challenging, satisfying design career.

When we moved to southern California several years earlier, we did not know anyone so we had to start at square one. Establishing ties and settling into our new community took time and effort, but now we were comfortably entrenched in a routine and lifestyle. We had joined a dynamic church, formed close friendships, and discovered many ways to enjoy our new surroundings.

At last, all seemed to be in order. Such was life on Saturday morning, April 25. I had absolutely no idea, vague uneasiness, or any

sort of premonition that at exactly 2:44 P.M. that afternoon, in a split second my entire life would change.

My life mate, best friend, and constant companion of nearly thirty years, my husband John went on a mountain bike ride, as he had done hundreds of times before. I kissed him good-bye as he finished preparing for his ride. The next time I saw John was a day later—at the mortuary—to identify his autopsied body. Details of that thirty-something-hour interval and its harsh reality are permanently engraved in my mind.

After completing my errands, I returned home late in the afternoon. John should have been back from his bike ride, as we had planned to meet friends at church. At first, I was not concerned, simply thinking he had taken a longer ride. However, as the time continued to pass, fear crept in. My husband was overly reliable, and his failure to show up on time was uncharacteristic.

I didn't know what to do. John had gone on a mountain bike ride—so he could have been anywhere. I did not actually know where to look. But I had to do *something*. I started driving down roads he might have traveled on his way to the “off-road” locations, hoping to spot him in case he had run into trouble on his way home. This search was futile, so I returned home. Two friends met me there.

Unsettled, dazed, scared, I did not know what to think. A sense of foreboding settled over me like heavy fog. My stomach churned.

Something terrible had happened—I just had no idea what it was. I called several hospital emergency rooms, but found no answers. Images and questions frantically darted through my mind. Was John injured and lying somewhere on the side of the mountain? Had he been involved in an accident on the road? Had an animal attacked him? He had encountered mountain lions on previous rides.

Several hours had passed beyond the time I expected John to be home. I called the office of the Orange County Sheriff to inquire about my husband and request help.

Soon after my phone call, a sheriff's deputy arrived. He opened his laptop computer and began to ask all sorts of questions as he filled out his report. The detailed inquiry seemed to drag on forever. Periodically, the deputy made and received phone calls. I did not realize he was painstakingly trying to piece together all the parts of the gradually unfolding puzzle.

For some unknown reason, on this particular day, John was riding without any identification. I had no way of knowing that emergency room personnel had already pronounced him dead (at 2:44 in the afternoon) as an unidentified "John Doe." Many hours passed before the authorities were able to process the information I supplied, along with military medical and dental records, to identify my husband's body.

John was less than a mile from home when a massive heart attack hit, accompanied by a fatal arrhythmia. He had taken a short cut through an apartment-complex parking lot, and when he collapsed, someone saw him and called 911. John was unconscious when the paramedics arrived. He never regained consciousness. The event happened without warning.

Images of that evening remain with me today. The deputy excused himself and went outside to retrieve something from his car. When he returned, two officials from the coroner's office came with him. Dispassionately, they said John was dead. They informed me that he had had a heart attack. I didn't believe their report, and told them so. The details they conveyed were sketchy, but they handed me a small bag containing a few of his personal belongings—a worn, soiled, blue nylon fanny pack, a small set of bicycle-repair tools, and a black sport

wristwatch. John could not possibly be dead, so why did they have his things? Nothing made sense.

How surreal that night was. I had only heard of the term “out of body experience,” but that night, I felt as though I had stepped outside of myself. Observing everything that was happening in the room, I even heard myself talk—somehow separated from my physical body. I felt as though a movie were playing before my eyes, except I was actually *in* the movie.

I did not make it through the toughest experience of my life on my own.

I vividly remember phone calls to tell the unspeakable news to family and friends. The worst was a dreaded and heart-wrenching call to our daughter, Kelly. She was out of town, and I tried for hours to reach her—not to tell her the news about John, but to ask her to come directly to our house when she returned. Yet she demanded to know what was wrong. She was distraught and hysterical.

Unexpected death. Instantly, my entire world—and the way I related to it—changed. Only those who have experienced the devastating loss of someone extremely close will understand. Only those who have faced, firsthand, the unbelievable depths of grief have the *capacity* to understand. And until my grief experience, I did not understand either.

Incomprehensible, indescribable grief. Thus began an inescapable journey—one I did not expect and certainly did not want. Yet, this unwelcome journey has been a life-changing experience of widespread proportions—with changes that are still happening today, more than twelve years later.

I did not make it through the toughest experience of my life on my own. My faith in God gave me the will to go on when the pain was more than I could bear. He helped me do what I could not do alone. He did not let me down. He took care of me.

In spite of everything, I can tell you with absolute certainty there *is* hope, even during the darkest, seemingly most hopeless times of grief. I can also tell you with confidence that, in time, your life can be rich, satisfying, and fulfilling in new ways because of your grief experience—*if you allow it to be so*. The choice is yours.

*Grief is a process.
It takes time.
Hold on.*

Grief is a process. It takes time. Hold on.

And remember, hope is still alive, even if you can't see it yet.

Just as an acorn holds the promise of a mighty, towering oak (and from a seemingly lifeless cocoon emerges an amazing, glorious butterfly), the miracle of hope lives within you . . .

—JUDY BRIZENDINE

C H A P T E R

1

.....
**WHAT DOES GRIEF LOOK LIKE
—AND HOW DOES IT PROGRESS?**
.....

*Grief comes in unexpected surges . . . mysterious cues that set
off a reminder of grief.*

*It comes crashing like a wave, sweeping me in its crest, twisting
me inside out.*

Then recedes, leaving me broken.

Oh, Mama, I don't want to eat, to walk, to get out of bed.

Reading, working, cooking, listening, mothering.

Nothing matters.

I do not want to be distracted from my grief.

I wouldn't mind dying.

I wouldn't mind it at all.

—TOBY TALBOT
(FROM *A Book About My Mother*)

GRIEF—in the beginning is . . .

- . . . an overwhelming, indescribable pain
- . . . all-consuming
- . . . shocking and numbing to our senses
- . . . aloneness
- . . . a multitude of tangled emotions
- . . . an altered reality
- . . . heavy and exhausting
- . . . a total upheaval
- . . . an inward-focused look

GRIEF, as it progresses, is . . .

- . . . a disorderly process
- . . . a journey through unknown territory
- . . . unpredictable tears
- . . . ocean waves that crash suddenly upon us
- . . . an intense emotional pain and sadness
- . . . moments of sharp, unexpected anger
- . . . living life on “autopilot”
- . . . at times, completely draining—physically, emotionally,
and spiritually
- . . . intermingled with fear, anxiety, and confusion
- . . . realization of shattered dreams

You may also experience . . .

- . . . hollowness
- . . . detachment, disconnection
- . . . a state of lost security and instability

- . . . difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- . . . overly sensitive feelings
- . . . physical discomfort—such as tightness in the chest; rapid heartbeat or skipped beats; sleep disruption; change in eating habits; nausea; and hyperactivity or complete exhaustion

Along with grief comes . . .

- . . . the need to talk
- . . . the need to be heard
- . . . the need to know someone cares (really cares)

GRIEF—later on (could be years after the loss), may show up as . . .

- . . . tears, especially when triggered by reminders
- . . . changes in feelings, thoughts, and attitudes—“new perspectives”
- . . . a changed identity and new roles
- . . . an ongoing, lengthy recovery that lasts much longer than we wish or think
- . . . a remapping of life—a need to form new routines, interests, and relationships
- . . . a *progression* of letting go or “release”
- . . . a new “normal” (whatever that is for you)

and then, *perhaps* . . .

- . . . refocused thinking and planning
- . . . a new examination of life, priorities, and faith

- . . . a greater awareness of others' needs and hurts
- . . . a heightened sense of time's finite nature
- . . . renewal within yourself (if you choose)
- . . . new dreams for your future

GRIEF—*possibilities*, even later in the process, may include . . .

- . . . a desire to help others
- . . . a compassion for others
- . . . a greater comprehension of love
- . . . personal growth
- . . . a stronger faith and desire to know God at a deeper level

Grief—unpredictable, disorderly, disruptive, unimaginable—is difficult to capture in words, and even tougher to comprehend. Grief—a confusing maze—is as hard to navigate as to understand.

Grief is like a foreign language when we first confront it:
awkward, unfamiliar, unwieldy, and overwhelming.

Making sense of the chaos of grief is a process of your own design carried out on your timetable, along with certain people you choose to let in as you travel your path to healing.

Take one step at a time. You're stronger than you think. You *can* do this, and it's worth the price. But no one else can do it for you.

You may feel as though you are alone, but God promises He will not leave you, He is in control, and He has good plans in store for you. Trust His words. And hold on to His promises. Hold on tight.

I know what I'm doing.

I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you,
not abandon you,
plans to give you the future you hope for.

—Jeremiah 29:11 (*MSG*)

Write about the details of your loss. Describe what happened and how you feel.

Hope Thought:

God answers "knee mail."

—UNKNOWN AUTHOR

**THOUGHT
TO WRITE
ABOUT**



Unless you've been through it, you can't understand it. It's that simple.

You can't breathe. You can't think. You can't move.

STUNNED by Grief is a highly focused, conversational book that cuts through the clutter and zeroes in on "flashpoint" issues critical to a griever's healing. It's realistic. Revealing. Practical.

A fellow traveler's down-to-earth approach to grief, ***STUNNED*** is for anyone struggling with death—or any of life's tragic losses. Don't go through grief alone. Join the author to discover:

- ▶ Straight talk from people who have been there
- ▶ What to expect and how to thrive again
- ▶ Tools, tips and strategies to enhance healing and remap your life
- ▶ How God can transform your grief

— EASY TO USE FORMAT. READ STRAIGHT THROUGH—OR TURN TO ANY KEY TOPIC. —

"From loss to renewal, *STUNNED* provides clear, inspirational steps to manage the death of a loved one. Everyone, from military spouses to parents and friends, will find calm, steady guidance that resonates."

—SCOTT RUTTER (LTC, U.S. Army, Ret.), national spokesman,
Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)

"Life is about the never-ending beginnings we all experience through loss and change. Read and learn from Judy's experience."

—BERNIE SIEGEL, MD, author of *365 Prescriptions for the Soul*
and *Prescriptions for Living*

Do you feel confused? Overwhelmed? Lost?
11 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GRIEF – Find out more at
www.StunnedByGrief.com

Companion *STUNNED by Grief Journal* available



Judy Brizendine is a business professional whose life radically changed course after the tragic, sudden death of her husband. That experience, along with facilitating grief-support workshops, helped her define a new, practical, and personal approach to grief.


BennettKnepp
PUBLISHING

USD \$ 18.95
CAN \$ 18.25
UK £ 11.75
EU € 13.25

ISBN 978-0-9831688-1-2



9 780983 168812