



Filling Empty Shoes

Blending Out of Widowhood

Just months after the diagnosis, Marty died of cancer. Stricken with grief, Rhonda suddenly found herself a single parent with five children. One day turned into the next as she leaned heavily on Daniel and his two older sisters to help with the baby and their younger sister.

Time seemed to bring a surreal sense of normalcy to the family's life without Dad. Rhonda began to heal and after a few years, a new love entered her life. While love and a new marriage were an answer to Rhonda's prayers, her teenage daughters and preteen son saw Danny as a threat.

Before Rhonda and Danny married, the children seemed to accept him just fine, but once they walked the aisle, attitudes changed. Daniel, Haley, and Abby resented Danny's presence in their father's place. As the new head of the house, he tried to help Rhonda with correction and discipline, but his authority was always met with biting words of rejection: "You're not my dad, and you never will be!" Anger seemed to be the prevalent emotion in this newly established household.

Blending a family with teenagers is never as easy as we think it's going to be when we say, "I do," but blending out of widowhood presents its own unique challenges to making a family work. Clinging to a lost parent's memory with unwavering loyalty is natural for teens. It's all they have left of that parent. In time, the deceased parent grows more perfect and flawless as memories are bronzed by grief.

When he was alive, Marty had been a very strict disciplinarian, but Abby, Haley, and Daniel could only remember how much he loved them. Danny continued to reach out to his stepchildren with as much compassion and



understanding as possible, but he continually faced accusations of being mean and too strict.

Naturally, a stepparent trying to administer discipline and carry out the hum-drum of daily routines will always come up wearing a smaller sized shoe than a deceased parent. When sincerity is met with resentment, resistance, and a lack of respect, the temptation is to compete with the memory or, worse, throw in the towel. These hurdles can be overcome, and family relationships will develop over time.

The key is digging deep and anchoring yourself to the solid foundation of Jesus in your home. You also must remain solidly committed to your marriage covenant and communicate daily with your spouse behind closed doors.

Tensions can be eased and emotions defused by following a few simple rules to blending out of widowhood. Instead of clomping around in shoes that keep growing in size, here are six ways to honor them while comfortably wearing your own.

1. Don't jump into the role of disciplinarian. When teens have lost a parent to death, the stepparent usually is seen as an outsider. It takes time to be accepted as an authority.

Like in Jesus' parable of sewing a new piece of cloth into an old garment, (Luke 5:36), the new stepparent is like a stiff new piece of denim patching up a hole in an old pair of jeans. To avoid any new tearing, the new stepparent has to be softened by a few "washings." Sewing a patch over the hole left by a deceased parent is a process accomplished one stitch at a time.

2. Discuss any parenting decisions with your spouse behind closed doors. This will prevent your children from playing one parent against the other. After coming



to an agreement on permission or discipline, allow the natural parent to explain the decision since he or she may draw less resistance, but the two of you have worked together to bring unity to the family.

3. Don't crush your teen's spirit. When your teenager tests your patience and authority, guard against quick answers that might crush her spirit. Remind her that you're not there to replace her deceased parent, but God has placed you in the family to love them and help them. Though they may not receive your sincerity right away, your fair attitude and even responses will be remembered, appreciated, and even expected as your family begins to blend.

4. Allow special "just us" times between the natural parent and the child. Adolescence is a very insecure season, but it's even more so if a teen feels like they have lost both parents—one to death and the other to remarriage. In busy families, it is easy to overlook this need.

Danny won the respect of his teenage stepchildren by suggesting they have some special "just us" time with their mom. He let them know he was willing to take care of the younger children and do whatever was necessary to make it happen.

5. Don't bury the memory of the dead. In widowhood, fond memories and love will always remain for the former spouse and parent. To put away all the pictures and mementos from the past would be to pretend that person was no longer a part of the family. In truth, a deceased's memory is very important to your teens and your spouse.

This isn't to say that a new stepparent is any less important. Their memory is like reading a book, moving from one chapter to the next. Each chapter builds upon the last until the whole story is told. To remove a chapter would be to leave a hole in the novel. The deceased parent is chapter 1, but the pages are still turning.



6. Don't compete with the deceased parent. You are a different person, wearing a different pair of shoes. If the deceased mom was a "Betty Crocker®" homemaker who baked cookies every day and you're not, just be the person God created you to be. Don't try and do things that don't come naturally to you.

Your teenage stepchildren will see right through a façade and resent you for it. Share the gifts God has uniquely given you, whether it is shopping in the mall or going for a hike. By being yourself, you'll avoid competing with a deceased parent's memory. Instead, you will be celebrating a new and different life. In time, your stepchildren will grow to love and respect you for who you are.

- Don't try to do it all yourself. Let friends, especially Christian friends, into your world.
- Submit to pastoral counsel. A godly counselor will provide different perspectives on parenting issues as well as biblical guidance on life decisions.
- Listen to your teens without compromising standards and values. Avoid the temptation to become their best friend. Teens need the security of your parental love and authority.
- Have a set time each week for "just us" time with your kids. You don't necessarily need to spend money on them, but they need to know they are important to you and you are there for them.
- Keep Christ as the foundation of your home. Although your time is easily consumed with work and parenting, making Christ a priority is vital to having a healthy home, both spiritually and emotionally.